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Cold War Proxy Wars:

A Threat To The Unipolar World Order, A Realist View

By

Mikaela Devon Buryj

\* \* \* \* \*

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors  
in the Departments of Political Science

UNION COLLEGE

June, 2020

## ABSTRACT

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My senior thesis discusses and analyzes American foreign policy through the scope of the Realist theory of international relations. With the works of Realists like Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt in mind, I analyze this theory and then explore its implications on United States foreign policy in relation to three specific case studies. The case studies I examined are the contentions surrounding the post-Cold War NATO existence, the ongoing civil conflict in Syria, and the post-Soviet existence of Ukraine. All of which I have viewed as Cold War proxy wars between the United States and Russia.

In the post-Cold War landscape, the United States appeared as the unipolar, dominant power in what was previously a bipolar world. In this role, the United States embarked on a number of military interventions where American interests were arguably not at stake. Oftentimes, the United States intervened in states that posed no strategic, economic, or militaristic benefit. It was in these instances that the United States claimed to be acting on humanitarian concerns and often sought to transform the local political atmosphere and leadership in these countries.

In the contemporary post-post Cold War era, we can observe the global landscape shifting to become increasingly multipolar. As the Realist theory purports, states are self-interested, therefore seeking alliances and actions that bolster their interests. Accordingly, it is advantageous to look at the current state of affairs through a realist lens in which we observe every actor, including the United States, protect their interests and security in a self-serving manner. While policymakers in the United States follow the realist framework, we often judge

other actors behaving alike as aggressive or forbidding. My senior thesis highlights this hypocrisy through the three case studies and in light of the dynamic between the United States and Russia as they battle to assert their influence in the respective spheres. Looking to the future, I assert that in order to maintain the dominant role as the unipolar power, the United States should act with more restraint as to not threaten the other actors on the world stage.

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## I. Introduction

I present to you the post-post Cold War era. What is that you may wonder? Essentially it is the period following the post-Cold War era, which, in turn, preceded the Cold War period. As I present these chronological eras as crucial moments in American foreign policy, it becomes evident that events in global history critically shape our current political landscapes. To that end, I assert that we cannot effectively analyze current U.S. foreign policy without looking to the past, more specifically, without looking at the close of the Cold War and the state of affairs that followed. Currently, we are in a period that has seen the close of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union. With that came the rise of the United States as the leader of the new world order and the dominant, unipolar power in what was previously a bipolar world. We also saw the elimination of the Soviet Union which previously stood as a common enemy and bound other state actors together.

As the United States enjoys its role as the leading, dominant unipolar power on the world stage, it is exposed to numerous threats. Yet, as my thesis argues, the greatest threat to the United States' unipolar position is itself. My senior thesis discusses and analyzes American foreign policy through the scope of the Realist theory of international relations. By focusing on the works of theorists like Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt, I have harnessed a deeper understanding of the realist framework and will explore its implications on American foreign policy. The three case studies I have analyzed are the North American Treaty Organization (NATO), Ukraine, and Syria. I have viewed the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria and the contentions surrounding the post-Cold War NATO existence, as Cold War proxy wars between the United States and Russia. Through my analysis, I will show how these foreign policy initiatives have led the U.S. to act foolishly and in a threatening manner.

As the Realist theory purports, states are self-interested, therefore seeking alliances and actions that are beneficial to their needs and goals. Through my research and case studies I have found that as the world order shifts so do power dynamics, and with that so do interests and perceptions of security. As this occurs alliances too are altered and become more or less relevant and salient causing states to align with other actors who can protect their goals, interests, and security the best. As dynamics have shifted in the post and post-post Cold War era, the United States has embarked on several military interventions where American interests were arguably not at stake. Oftentimes, the U.S. intervened in states that posed no strategic, economic, or militaristic benefit. In these instances, the United States claimed to be acting on humanitarian concerns while they sought to transform the local political atmosphere and leadership in these countries, often exercising unrestrained power and influence. As a result, there now exists a greater sense of uncertainty and complexity as new alliances and new conflicts emerge. In response, each state acts in line with the realist approach to international relations, seeking to benefit and protect its interests and security in this anarchic world order.

Realists are also concerned with the balance of power. In the unipolar world order, there exists one singular dominant power, the United States. Therefore, since there is no power present to balance the United States, its power is unrestrained. While the U.S. justifies its actions and foreign policy initiatives by pointing to the need to protect our interests, a sense of hypocrisy arises. While it is in line with the realist framework for the U.S. to act forcefully to protect its interests and security, it is viewed as wrong and aggressive of other actors when they also act to protect their interests and security. We have experienced numerous instances in which American policymakers point to other aggressive actors who are supposedly threatening the peace and stability in the as justification for the

U.S. to respond or intervene or occupy other countries. I argue that it is this very behavior and unrestrained power that makes the United States its own worst enemy and threatens the status quo.

In the subsequent chapters, I will discuss and analyze the political turmoil in Ukraine and Syria and the contentious post-Soviet Union existence of NATO. I present these case studies as Cold War proxy wars between the U.S. and Russia in which there is a battle to exert influence and control while also limiting the power and influence of the other in the process. I argue that the U.S. is undermining its role as the dominant unipolar power by repeatedly engaging in these Cold War proxy wars which yields two unfavorable results. First, this exercise of power to counter the spread of Russian influence results in the destabilization of regions and then fosters hatred and resentment towards the United States. Second, this display of unrestrained U.S. power appears as a threat to other actors who may respond and therefore threaten the United States' position.



## II. A Review of Literature Surrounding the Realist Framework

We cannot effectively analyze current U.S. foreign policy without looking to the past, more specifically, without looking to the close of the Cold War and the state of affairs that remained. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, capitalism and democracy prevailed, and the United States appeared as the leader of the new world order. The United States assumed the role of the unipolar, dominant power in what was previously a bipolar world. Many scholars have looked to theories of international affairs to comprehend and predict what is happening and will happen on the world stage. In analyzing this somewhat new unipolar phenomenon, I look to scholars who preside over the Realist theory of international relations to understand the world order we are witnessing today. To understand why an event occurred, and why the world reacted as it did, we can look to theories of international relations to interpret the state of affairs.

Throughout this thesis and in the literature, I interact with below, I utilize the Realist theory as the leading framework in understanding the world order we observed throughout the Cold War and into the present-day post-post Cold War era. In viewing the post-Cold War events through a realist lens, I will argue that the dynamic has emerged in which every actor, including the United States, is acting in a self-interested manner to protect their interests and security. Yet, the United States views other actors who are behaving in this way as threatening international peace and overall interest and security.

In broad terms, the Realist theory highlights the global distribution of power. Within this distribution, some actors are more prone to conflict and some, that exist in a stable balance of power, are not. Realism is further broken down into two strains, classical and structural realism. Classical realism is associated with scholars like Hans Morgenthau, and in contrast, Structural realism is associated with scholars like Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt. Classical realism

posits that states, like human beings, have an intrinsic nature or desire to dominate others. This leads them to fight in wars. Additionally, theorists like Morgenthau to view a multipolar balance of power more favorably than a bipolar balance of power. Classical realism, unlike structural realism, emphasizes state behavior and human nature.

On the other hand, Structural realism stands as the more modern-day perspective of Realism and stands in contrast to the classical realist perspective. Structural realists like Waltz pay little regard to human nature, instead, they focus on the effects, structure, and distribution of power of the international system. Under this perspective, the international system consists of numerous great powers, or states, each of whom seeks to survive. Because one sole world government ceases to exist within the broader international system, there is anarchy and each state is engaged in a battle for survival. This condition leads the weaker states to balance against powerful rivals rather than bandwagon with them.

It is also important to point out that within the structural realist strain, there is a split between defensive and offensive realism. Of the scholars I will entertain, John Mearsheimer is considered to be an offensive realist while Stephen Walt, Kenneth Waltz, Robert Jervis, and Charles Glaser are considered to be defensive realists. For defensive realists, they have viewed states as simply seeking to survive. Defensive realists have also categorized great powers as the key to this survival through strategic alliances. According to Stephen Walt, Kenneth Waltz and other structural realists viewed the United States to be very secure during the Cold War. The only fear they considered was the possibility of the United States adopting a too aggressive foreign policy which would then cause other powers to react or be fearful. Later in this paper, I will discuss the security of the United States during the Cold War in more depth and I will elaborate and analyze this in relation to a unipolar versus multipolar world.

The two leading theorists within the sphere of Realism are Stephen Walt and Kenneth Waltz. As I pointed out above, both of these scholars consider themselves to be structural realists. However, their views differ slightly in that Waltz views states as balancing against power whereas Walt argues states balance against threats, as not all forms of power are inherently a threat. The two Realist theories I will grapple with are the balance-of-power theory<sup>1</sup> developed by Kenneth Waltz and a modified version of the balance-of-threat theory, developed by Stephen Walt. Both theories have offered competing accounts for how the U.S. will behave following the Cold War, yet cohesively they show that there has been a consistent U.S. security strategy on behalf of U.S. officials following the end of the Cold War. This strategy is one centered around the preservation of U.S. primacy and the security of their leading global position.

Stephen Walt breaks down the role of the realist theoretical perspective in his piece, *International Relations: One World, many Theories*, as he specifically discusses the realist perspective during the post-Cold War period. Walt highlights that Realism was the dominant theoretical perspective throughout the Cold War as “it depicts international affairs as a struggle for power among self-interested states and is generally pessimistic about the prospects for eliminating conflicts and war”.<sup>2</sup> At the close of the Cold War Realism remained the leading theoretical perspective because, “it’s traditional emphasis has been on the great powers, and after the Cold War the United States has been the dominant power in the international system”.<sup>3</sup> Where Stephen Walt stands in contrast to Kenneth Waltz is in his emphasis on state decision-making. Walt acknowledges Waltz’s point that there is an influential structure within the international system but, within the confines of any international structure, state leaders are able

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

<sup>2</sup>“*International Relations: One World, Many Theories*” By Stephen Walt, page 31.

<sup>3</sup>“*Preserving the Unipolar Moment*” By Michael Mastanduno, page 50.

to make decisions that will make their state more or less threatening to others. In other words, Waltz puts forth an argument that states balance against power whereas Walt puts forth an argument that states balance against threats.

Additionally, Walt diverges from Waltz's perspective in regard to the balance of power within the international system. Walt argues that the balance of power is not in an automatic balance because of anarchy and self-help, as Waltz puts forth. Rather, Walt argues that geography and the relative strength of states are influential factors that affect the balance of power and how states behave in the face of that balance. In terms of strengths of systems, Waltz argues against Morgenthau's point and instead pushes the sentiment that bipolarity was more stable than multipolarity.<sup>4</sup>

For my purposes, great powers are defined in terms of aggregate resources. These constitute; size of the population, military assets, and economic assets. Power then is defined by the distribution of these proponents among the states within this system. Strong states get involved in small wars that seem unethical and silly, the theoretical perspective gives reasoning for their actions. Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, and Robert Jervis take the position of a defensive realist. They put forth the argument that states constantly make the effort to feel safer but in doing so they develop a security dilemma.

At the close of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was at the brink of extinction and the United States found itself in a position of unprecedented power and influence. The new world order was essentially a blank slate with which the U.S. could impose its democratic values, free markets, and individual liberty on other states. Fueled by the long-awaited collapse of Communism, the U.S. chose to spread a new liberal world order aggressively sought to spread

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<sup>4</sup>“International Relations: One World, Many Theories” By Stephen Walt and Kenneth Waltz, “Theory of International Politics”.

the rule of law and democratic governance. In hindsight this has appeared to be more of a failed effort. Rather than building the path for peace, the U.S. has been in a constant state of war since the unipolar world order emerged.

In large part, this constant state of war that the United States has embarked on is bolstered by the multiple Cold War proxy wars that have emerged. While I will deeply analyze these proxy wars further in my case studies, I would like to point out that the very reason the U.S. has taken these courses of action are to counter the spread of Russian influence and power so that U.S. dominance can be preserved. Michael Mastanduno builds on this sentiment in his piece, *Preserving The Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War* when he argues that a dominant tendency of U.S. foreign policy is to, “preserve America’s position at the top of the international hierarchy”.<sup>5</sup> Mastanduno points out that U.S. foreign policy aligns with realist principles because the actions are chosen with the aim of preserving U.S. dominance and preserving and spreading American interests. To that end, it becomes evident that the role of American Exceptionalism has become a dangerous force in that we believe that our closely held values are universal. However, this is not the case. Trouble arises when the United States finds itself in confrontation with illiberal states that hold values we do not tolerate and find distasteful. In light of these political and ideological differences a host of proxy conflicts have emerged.

Kenneth Waltz presents the argument that power relies on diplomacy by which alliances are made and disrupted in his piece, *The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory*. He posits that alliances are made by states, “that have some but not all of their interests in common. The common interest is ordinarily a negative one: fear of other states”.<sup>6</sup> These alliances are made in

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<sup>5</sup>“Preserving The Unipolar Moment” By Michael Mastanduno, page 51.

<sup>6</sup>“The Origins of War in a Neorealist Theory” By Kenneth Waltz, Page 621.

the state's interest of defense. With this in mind, these alliances seek to, "increase cohesion among its members and add to its ranks inadvertently imperils an opposing alliance and provokes countermeasures".<sup>7</sup> Waltz makes the distinction that in a multipolar world, equal parties must look for a common denominator within their policies. Yet, in a bipolar world alliance leaders can have strategies which primarily advance their own interests and cope with their issues rather than satisfying their allies. There is then a sense of uncertainty as to who is dangerous and who is not. Waltz uses the example of the U.S. and Soviet Union not having to seek the approval of other states, but they did have to cope with each other. To this end, Waltz states that in a bipolar world overreaction by either or both powers is a source of danger. In a multipolar world miscalculation by some or all the powers involved is a source of danger. He argues that miscalculation is the greater of two evils here because it will most likely result in a chain reaction of events that will eventually threaten the status quo and result in war.

Waltz further discusses the outbreak of war as he says, "One must wonder why wars occur repeatedly even though their causes vary".<sup>8</sup> He argues that the varying characteristics of the states are not directly linked to the outcomes that are produced by their behavior. To expand on this, Waltz points out that historians have argued that WW1 was caused by the interaction of two closely balanced coalitions that were opposed. Whereas it is argued that WW2 was caused by the failure of states in combining forces to correct the imbalance of power that was created by an existing alliance.

Waltz argues that some states yearn for power just for power's sake. However, the Realist theory posits that we do not need to assume a strong lust for power in order to account for the fact that there is competition in the international arena. He says, "In an archaic domain, a state of

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<sup>7</sup>"The Origins of War in a Neorealist Theory" By Kenneth Waltz, Page 619.

<sup>8</sup>"The Origins of War in a Neorealist Theory" By Kenneth Waltz, page 617.

war exists if all parties lust for power”.<sup>9</sup> This is relevant because if we view each of the actors on the world stage through the realist lens, they each seek to protect their security and interests so will do what is needed to survive. Too much power in the hand of other actors therefore is seen as a threat to the security and interests of others. To that end, the international order is susceptible to wars because powers will balance against each other and enter alliances to counter other actors with too much power if they feel as though it is a threat. For my purposes, this aspect of the Realist theory further justifies the assertion that the United States poses as its own worst enemy because it is undermining its dominant role by following an aggressive foreign policy agenda which threatens other actors.

In taking a deeper look at Waltz’s balance-of-power theory<sup>10</sup>, I observed a keen focus surrounding the structure of the international system and how this factor compels states to act in a certain way. Waltz has little regard for human agency, and argues that states don’t choose their foreign policy, it is chosen for them by the structure and environment they exist in. Further, he believes that leaders do not have choices and foreign policy doesn’t matter because states appear in a structure and act in response to the structure, they find themselves in. Ultimately, each individual leader is faced with the same external environment.

In his other piece of literature, *The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory*, Waltz argues that international politics can be understood by emphasizing the effects of structure. In looking deeper at how structure affects actions and outcomes, the realist perspective rejects the assumption that an actor’s lust for power builds a sufficient cause of war in the absence of another cause. Waltz argues further that Realists point to the existing structure within events, not to the ambitions or intrigues that evoke the outbreak of conflict on an individual level. Structural

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<sup>9</sup>“The Origins of War in a Neorealist Theory” By Kenneth Waltz, page 620.

<sup>10</sup>Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

realism, Waltz argues, presents a systematic picture of international politics. Its components are depicted as units and states are unitary actors wanting to survive. As Waltz has argued in his balance-of-power theory<sup>11</sup>, the structural quality of the system is in anarchy because there is an absence of a central legitimate force.

Shifting our attention, in Stephen Walt's, balance-of-threat theory<sup>12</sup>, an emphasis is placed on balancing behavior as the main tendency in international relations. In *Preserving The Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War*, Mastanduno highlights Walt's argument that, "balancing behavior is most usefully understood as a response to threat".<sup>13</sup> Walt sets himself apart from other Realist theorists in his perception of how states appear threatening. He argues that geographic proximity, intentions, and offensive capability are the main factors states view as whether or not another actor is threatening.

In *The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory* By Kenneth N. Waltz, a different approach is taken. Waltz argues that Realism sees states having too much or too little power as a possible risk. If a state has excessive weakness (lack of power) it may open itself up to an attack from a greater strength that could have been avoided. Excessive strength (too much power) could prompt other states to increase their efforts and feel threatened by the dominant state and act accordingly. Waltz argues that "sensible" statesmen try to have an appropriate amount of power because of the effects associated with having too much or too little. In direct contrast to Stephen Walt, Waltz argues that the structure of the international system is what establishes whether or not a state is threatening. In his view, he holds little regard for human agency and tries to

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<sup>11</sup>Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

<sup>12</sup>Stephen Walt, "The Origins of Alliances" and "Alliance Formation and The Balance of Power"

<sup>13</sup>"Preserving the Unipolar Moment" By Michael Mastanduno, page 59 and, "The Origins of Alliances" By Stephen Walt.



establish that foreign policy doesn't matter as much because states appear in a structure and act in response to the structure, they find themselves in.

In regard to balancing power, Stephen Walt explores the competing propositions that states either balance against strong states or bandwagon with them in his piece, *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power*. Walt argues that alliances are commonly viewed as a response to threats. This piece of literature illuminates the connection between power and alliances as Walt points out that there are two options when a state enters into an alliance, they can balance (ally in opposition to main source of danger) or bandwagon (ally with states that pose the largest threat). If we were to assume that balancing was more common than bandwagoning, we could also assume that states are more secure because the aggressor would face a combined opposition. If we were to assume that bandwagoning is more common than security is not widespread because aggression is rewarded.

Walt's balance of power theory presents the position that states will join alliances in order to avoid domination by stronger powers. States join alliances to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superiority could pose a threat. Walt's bandwagoning theory portrays states as wanting to ally with the dominant power rather than against them, therefore aligning with a stronger side. American officials have embraced the bandwagoning hypothesis numerous times to justify American foreign policy commitments. Walt further reveals a theme in which states are attracted to strength, the more power you have and the more clearly this is demonstrated the more likely other states are to ally with you. If a state were to lose power, allies would opt for neutrality or worse, defect to the other side.

Walt dives into the question of which approach is more common. He argues that actors often justify their actions by invoking the bandwagoning school of thought but history provides

little evidence to support that. Rather, throughout history it is shown that states facing an external threat choose to balance against the threat rather than bandwagon with it. When given the opportunity to align in a way that preserves most of the state's freedom of action, the state will choose this option rather than, "accepting subordination under a potential hegemon".<sup>14</sup> It is safer to balance against potential threats than to expect and hope stronger states to remain peaceful. Throughout history we have seen that when one state has sought to dominate, the others fiercely act to combine and align to counter the threat. When regional threats emerged in the Middle East many Middle Eastern states aligned with either the Soviet Union or the United States. This shows the strong tendency for states to balance when they are making choices about alliances. Those who argue the opposite, that bandwagoning is the dominant theory of international politics face severe effects. In this belief, actors distort American security priorities because they inflate the perceived benefits of large military forces. Additionally, this notion makes it easier for allies to piggyback and free ride off of the stronger power as it encourages the U.S. to do the most work. The U.S. as a result pays a high price when they don't acknowledge that the dominant tendency is for other actors to balance. Walt goes as far to argue that bandwagoning is likely to have been, "the principal intellectual error underlying the most counterproductive ecesses in postwar American foreign policy".<sup>15</sup>

In his piece, *Hypotheses On Misperception*, Robert Jervis makes the argument that while determining how an actor intends to act, he must predict how other actors will act as their actions may have an effect. Jervis argues that we cannot assume that it is irrational for actors to adjust incoming information to align more closely to existing beliefs, especially when decision-makers'

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<sup>14</sup>Stephen Walt, *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power*, International Security, vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring, 1985) page 14.

<sup>15</sup>Stephen Walt, *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power*, International Security, vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring, 1985) page 16.

attempt to estimate the intentions of other states because they have to take account of the danger that the other state is trying to deceive them.

Returning to Kenneth Waltz's balance-of-power theory<sup>16</sup>, the assumption is made that states aim to balance against each other in an effort to increase their chance of survival in the face of lacking sufficient power. With that in mind, when there is an accumulation of power in the hands of one actor, it will evoke the rise of new powers and the formation of coalitions of actors that have the goals of balancing the power of the dominant state actor. In accordance with Waltz's theory, it is understood that the structure of the system is based off of the distribution of power which thus determines the outcomes on the international stage. Waltz's theory also defines international orders by the number of dominant great powers within it at a specific point. Since realists expect a multipolar world order to be in more strife than a bipolar world, realists also are more pessimistic when considering the possibility of peace and alliances amongst great powers. Furthermore, Waltz suggests that the balance-of-power theory<sup>17</sup> yields that the structure of the unipolar world order will, by nature give way to a rise in other competing powers. Therefore, the dominant state is better off enjoying their current unipolarity but acknowledging that it will not last and efforts to preserve it will not be effective. Rather, the dominant state actor should accept the inevitability of multipolarity and act in a way to take advantage of it.

Stephen Walt also grapples with this issue of anticipating the actions of other actors in his piece, *Taming American Power*. Walt argues that, because the U.S. is a world superpower, the only thing it can do to undermine its own power is act aggressively and thus turn adversaries into powerful countries that then want to counter their own power. Furthermore, he believes that America acts in a questionable manner because it can, and it has. According to realist logic, the

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<sup>16</sup>Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

<sup>17</sup>Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

world order from 1991 - present is characterized by total unitary polarity with no military rival thus no external force to check U.S. power. Walt tries to convince U.S. officials to not act stupidly because it is only pushing China and Russia to acquire more power and they could potentially form a military alliance and coalition to counter the U.S. Though the end of the Cold War altered many prominent features of world politics, it did not alter the international system. The fact that states still existed in anarchy with no world power to keep order and protect them from each other still existed.

To this end, states will continue to worry if one state becomes too powerful and more powerful than all the rest. Walt argues this very principle has governed the U.S. strategy throughout its rise. U.S. leaders to that end have consistently opposed any other state that threatens the establishment of regional hegemony in Europe or Asia as it will create a rival power to America. However, on the flip side of this, other actors worry about U.S. primacy because the U.S. can act unchallenged due to their unrivaled power. To hone in more on U.S. primacy, U.S. leaders and intellectuals alike continually cast U.S. primacy in a favorable light as a means to justify our involvement overseas. Unfortunately, the rest of the world does not share the U.S.'s views on their primacy. In one instance, people around the world do look favorable on America's democracy and achievements. Yet since 1991, this sentiment of viewing the U.S. as favorable has declined.

Within the bipolar structure of the Cold War, the actions of the United States were somewhat predictable because they were responding to the constraints of the Soviet Union and in response to a goals signals from within the international system. These constraints and signals coerced the United States to intervene in instances in order to support anti-Soviet / anti-communist regimes. However, in his work, Mastanduno points out, "In the unipolar structure the

international constraints have been lifted, and, in the absence of clear signals from the international structure, intervention policy should become more haphazard and episodic”.<sup>18</sup> The evidence that he points to relate to the costs associated with U.S. credibility and prestige in relation to potential interventions on the world stage. Mastanduno makes the argument that in the bipolar system this was an aspect that U.S. officials would worry about at great lengths, however, after the Cold War they are less concerned with less successful interventions and their effect on the United States’ reputation.

Mastanduno attempts to tackle the issue of locating a pattern within U.S. intervention policy post-Cold War but struggles to reach a consensus. He points to our involvement in Iraq which was followed by a reluctant stance on the intervention in Bosnia. This instance could show the restraint on behalf of the United States as it is more interested in acting in line with their interests rather than as a global policeman of the international system. If this were to be true then we may need to make the assumption that the United States acts in accordance with their interests, say, oil. Therefore the U.S. showed reluctance in intervening in Bosnia because there was no oil there as our primary materialistic interest. However, this theory is somewhat refuted later in Mastanduno’s piece because he discusses U.S. intervention in Somalia, a place also absent of oil. However, U.S. intervention in Somalia was strongly fueled by humanitarian concerns, of which were also present in Rwanda. Yet, in Rwanda, like Bosnia, the U.S. showed reluctance to intervene.

I will argue that the United States has returned to an approach in which they act in such a manner that counters Russian expansion. By looking at three case studies: NATO, Ukraine, and Syria I will explore how the United States has acted in an unconstrained manner causing the

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<sup>18</sup>“Preserving the Unipolar Moment” By Michael Mastanduno, page 57.

global landscape to shift. Rather than adopting a Walt approach and acting with restraint in the face of power struggles on the international stage, the United States has acted more in line with Waltz. Rather than responding to conflicts on the international stage with restraint and only balancing threats, the United States has responded to conflicts by balancing against any power.

John Mearsheimer is another influential realist and aligns himself as an offensive realist. In his piece, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer disagrees with the notion that war between great powers and security competition is no longer present in the international system. Most European states maintain an underlying fear that Germany will behave aggressively if American power does not serve as a check. To that end, international politics will likely remain a domain that is characterized by ruthless, dangerous, and self-interested business, as we will see each state striving to, “maximize their share of world power”.<sup>19</sup> Mearsheimer pushes the argument that great powers do not only strive to gain power at the expense of other states, they want to thwart their rivals who are also focused on gaining power.

Mearsheimer also discusses Waltz’s balance-of-power theory <sup>20</sup> as he highlights the assumption made that states simply aim to survive and above all else, they seek security. Mearsheimer credits Waltz for putting defensive realism on the map and highlighting that it is the structure of the international system which forces states to pay careful attention to the balance of power because that is key to survival. Waltz emphasizes that anarchy leads states to behave in a defensive manner in order to maintain the balance of power. In response however, states constantly make the effort to feel safer but by doing that you develop a security dilemma.

Furthering Mearsheimer’s points, Charles Glaser makes the same structural realist argument that this approach to understanding the state of affairs is driven by the implications of

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<sup>19</sup>“The Tragedy of Great Power Politics” By John Mearsheimer, page 2.

<sup>20</sup>Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics.

international anarchy, derived from the lack of an international authority. In his piece, *Realists As Optimists: Cooperation As Self-Help*, Glaser argues that competition between major powers within an international system is normal. Further, he argues that in times of peace, states will respond to the pressures of anarchy by dealing with adversaries by gaining allies and arms racing as opposed to cooperating through common interests. He argues this is because anarchy discourages cooperation because it requires states to concern themselves with the relative gains of others and the threat of adversaries cheating on agreements. Glaser's arguments connect to Mearsheimer's argument that, "states seek to survive under anarchy by maximizing their power relative to other states, in order to maintain the means for self-defense".<sup>21</sup> However, it is important to note here that structural realism assumes that security is the goal to which states give priority in an anarchic system. In his piece, *Realism and Restraint*, Mearsheimer credits Glaser's work, *Realists As Optimists*, for capturing the perspective that, "Great powers most often go to war for non-realist reasons."<sup>22</sup> This is seen to be a result of the structure of the international system and its ability to punish aggressors.

A specific difference I noted between Glaser and other realists, is that while others take a pessimistic approach to the possibility of cooperation between powers on the international stage, Glaser sees this pessimism as unwarranted. He argues that, "Structural realism, properly understood predicts that, under a wide range of conditions, adversaries can best achieve their security goals through cooperative policies, not competitive ones, and should, therefore, choose cooperation when these conditions prevail."<sup>23</sup> Glaser also provides insight into the present day situation. He evaluates the modern international arena and offers an optimistic structural realist

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<sup>21</sup>"Back to the Future" By John Mearsheimer, page 12.

<sup>22</sup>"Realism and Restraint" By John Mearsheimer, page 16.

<sup>23</sup>"Realists as Optimists" By Charles Glaser, page 51.

analysis. He argues that this is because states pursue security, not advantages to relative power, structural realism does not predict that the West will try to take advantage of current Russian weakness”<sup>24</sup>. This is viewed in a positive light because military competition would increase the threats to future Western security as Russia has a large nuclear force. The current, cooperative policies the West is pursuing like, “providing economic support, continuing with arms control instead of launching an arms race, and coordinating on foreign policy”<sup>25</sup>, look more advantageous in terms of securing long term security interests.

The Structural realist approach relates to balance of power and how the international arena operates today in that the United States is an ethnocentric power, concerned with remaining powerful through protecting and exerting their security. The rest of the world is not focused on the U.S. but ultimately, due to the balance of power actions in the rest of the world ends up involving the U.S. Other states act in ways that don’t directly acknowledge the U.S. Rather, they act in a way to benefit and protect themselves. These other actors are not acting to protect or respect American interests, they are acting to uphold their own interests. Turning our attention to Russia, they would view their action of intervening in the Ukraine as a way to undermine democracy and protect their interests by ensuring a close neighbor does not become an ideological enemy. In a self-interested manner, President Vladimir Putin is very cynical about Democracy, but his main goal is not to simply intervene in a neighboring country because he has the ability to do so. Rather, by intervening to undermine democracy he sees Russia as protecting their own interests, despite the harm that may cause. Countries will do what is necessary to protect their own interests.

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<sup>24</sup>“Realists as Optimists” By Charles Glaser, page 88.

<sup>25</sup>“Realists as Optimists” By Charles Glaser, page 88.



In considering the strains of realism each of the theorists I have outlined above stem from, my thesis will align with Stephen Walt's framework in my efforts to analyze the international arena and unipolar world order we have experienced since the close of the Cold War. I will use my three case studies to argue that the United States should focus on the larger picture balance of power within the international community and the long-term power threats that present themselves. I will use Walt's perspective to further examine the conflict in Syria, the political climate in Ukraine, and the fate of NATO to show that the United States is currently its own worst enemy due to its lack of constraint and foolish behavior. In line with the Realist theory, we need to concern ourselves with the balance of power on the world stage in order to remain the dominant superpower in the unipolar world.

### III. NATO: The Protector and Provoker

This chapter will discuss the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, more commonly known as NATO, and its role in the post-Cold War unipolar world order. As my first case study, I will view NATO as a current proxy war between the two previous bipolar world powers, the United States and Russia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States has emerged as the dominant power in the Unipolar world order. In that capacity the United States has advocated for NATO expansion, especially Eastward. Russia has responded to these policy initiatives with the viewpoint that this expansion serves as a direct threat to their national interest. This chapter focuses on NATO's interactions and expansions and what this means for the organization's role as a protector against the Soviet Union and more recently, a provoker of Russian anger going forwards.

NATO exists as a Western influenced multilateral organization originating during the Cold War with the purpose of establishing a containment doctrine which would prevent any further Soviet advancements into Europe. Stephen Walt describes NATO's expansion Eastward from a realist perspective as, "an effort to extend Western influence - well beyond the traditional sphere of vital U.S. interests - during a period of Russian weakness and is likely to provoke a harsh response from Moscow".<sup>26</sup> As Walt has presented it, NATO expansion currently serves as a direct threat to Russian national interests and security. While the Soviet Union officially fell at the close of the Cold War in 1991, NATO, serving as a counter to Soviet expansion, still exists today. If each state is existing in an anarchic world with the goal of survival, greater powers concerned with the overall balance of power will become more or less threatened depending on the given balance of power. U.S. driven NATO expansion Eastward threatens Russia as a great

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<sup>26</sup>"International Relations: One World, Many Theories" By Stephen Walt. Page 30. *Foreign Policy*.

power and could possibly evoke a reaction. In turn, and in line with Walt's realist approach, the United States may undermine its own position of power by taking an overly aggressive foreign policy approach.<sup>27</sup>

The Cold War was essentially a battle between the East and the West and their respective influences and influencers. This era in global history can be considered as a lengthy period of geopolitical tension and varying proxy wars. This period was characterized by hostility, competition, and conflict which, thankfully, fell short of all-out war. Since the end of the Cold War, international relations and American foreign policy has been transformed. The period which was defined by the bipolar world order closed and a new chapter of international relations has opened, yielding a more complex and unpredictable world order in which the United States enjoys unprecedented power and influence as the dominant, unipolar power. In this thesis and through my case studies I argue that the United States has been acting in an aggressive and unrestrained manner as it enters into these Cold War proxy wars. To that end, the United States is undermining and threatening its role and influence as the unipolar power.

In the first section below, I will briefly introduce some background information on both the former Soviet Union and NATO. From there I will provide context on the topic of NATO as a source of contention, first amongst NATO members themselves and then in relation to Russia. I will then discuss the post-Cold War events that occurred to influence the tumultuous relationship between the United States and Russia, a love/hate relationship if you will. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by discussing the current expansions of NATO and those implications on the unipolar world order and put forward my own policy recommendations.

### **Background of NATO and the Former Soviet Union**

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<sup>27</sup>“International Relations: One World, Many Theories” By Stephen Walt. Page 32. *Foreign Policy*.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was created in 1949 with the purpose of providing collective security against the Soviet Union and the threat they posed at the time. The allies that joined this alliance projected their commitment to democracy, the rule of law, and individual liberty. As the battlefields of the Cold War expanded to far reaching locations like Cuba and Vietnam, tensions along the iron curtain reached a gridlock. American politician and diplomat, George Kennan, influenced American Cold War Policy with his indoctrination of the famous approach of containment. He stated, “It is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.”<sup>28</sup>, suggesting that when the United States meets aggression and hostility from a Communist state, they needed to push back firmly. In other words, when the Soviet Union exerted its power and influence, the United States needed to respond with equal or greater force to contain the spread of that power and influence.

I see Kennan’s points connecting to my own analysis of realism in the broader scope of the post-Cold War era because we can observe the United States in a position of unrivaled power as it assumes its dominant role in the unipolar world. In that position the United States enjoys great influence so it should act in a restrained manner to prolong its position as the sole leading power in the unipolar structure. If we view Kennan’s policy of containment as the call to intervene in every communist aggression and prevent a domino effect then, arguably, the United States is acting foolishly. This is due to the fact that repeated interventions ultimately end up threatening weaker actors. Not only that, but repeated intervention threatens more powerful actors as well which then fosters sentiments of resentments towards American unipolarity, thus undermining the U.S. role as the dominant power. However, if containment was a policy geared

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<sup>28</sup>George Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” in *Foreign Affairs Magazine*. July 1947.

towards selective interventions in conflicts which narrowly pertained to American interests, the United States would have the power to act strategically and that action could be economic, diplomatic, or militaristic in nature.

As our history books have told us, the Cold War period led to immense shifts at the cultural, political, economic, and societal levels. These shifts paved the way for a pattern of Western opposition to Soviet rule and a de-legitimization of Communist ideology. Eventually, the regimes that were established by the Soviet Union began to crumble, and from a Western viewpoint, the Eastern European states under Soviet control were freed in 1991 after 45 years of strict Soviet rule.

It has now been nearly 30 years since the Cold War ended. The Soviet Union collapsed, and Russia emerged as a weaker successor state. Eastern Europe formerly under Soviet control has become freer and more democratic. Finally, many of the former Soviet controlled states have been integrated into various international institutions like the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

### **NATO As a Source of Contention: U.S. Relations With NATO Members**

With the downfall of the Soviet Union comes the elimination of the common enemy, bonding Western Europe and the United States. Originally, during the Cold War the United States and Western Europe joined forces to counter the threat of the Soviet Union and the spread of communism. However, at the close of the Cold War that common denominator and bonding factor was eliminated from this relationship, leaving future relations up to question. While both the United States and Western Europe have shifting foreign policy priorities, they have more or less stood in solidarity on many global issues in order to present a united front through the NATO alliance. This can largely be seen through NATO's prolonged existence. It seems to me

that the U.S. and our Western European allies seek to maintain a relationship in which our similar interests can be preserved and protected through the threat of military power. Thus, NATO members maintain this alliance despite its entire purpose having been accomplished nearly 30 years ago. That being said, though they share many commonalities in terms of history and culture, the United States and Western Europe seem to be drifting apart in the post-post Cold war landscape. As foreign policy concerns shift, so do our priorities and relations, and therefore the NATO alliance is questioned.

One of the main post-Cold War era issues the United States and its European allies has been faced with is how to go about the role of the world police. A small number of issues that fall under this category would be how to respond in an allied manner to the atrocities in Bosnia and Kosovo in the former Yugoslavia, how to respond to an increasingly aggressive Russia, and how to handle increasing terrorist hot spots across the Middle East. The nature of this alliance also allows the members, in theory, to focus on whether or not to employ multilateral or bilateral strategies in certain situations and how to address conflicts that lie outside the alliance's borders.

There are also severe shortcomings and factions within the NATO alliance and in general between the United States and Western European nations. There are political, cultural, religious, and social ties that are loosening and drifting apart. I would argue that as time progresses these splits are causing Western European NATO members and the U.S. to drift further apart, resulting in weaker foreign policy and strategic agreements. Since the end of the Cold War there is no longer one collective enemy tying members together.

A Specific split between the U.S. and Western European members lies within their political cultures. For example, Europeans believe in a strong state whereas Americans are often skeptical of a strong central government. Americans tend to be more competitive and

individualistic while Europeans tend to favor collectivism and cooperation. Out of relative weakness, the Europeans prefer multilateral solutions to international problems. Along similar lines, in terms of military power, Europeans have preferred compromise and negotiating strategies whereas the United States has a strong military and is a global military superpower. Therefore, the U.S. is more inclined to use that strength. U.S. foreign policy is highly reflective of domestic politics in the sense that it is highly susceptible to the influence of interest groups and political quid pro quo. Whereas, European foreign policy is characterized by the strong bureaucratic traditions of the foreign ministries which are less representative of interest groups and/or domestic pressures.

Other events like the Iraq invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the toppling of the Qaddafi regime in Libya have caused deep factions amongst the U.S. and other NATO members. This reckless and impulsive behavior on behalf of the U.S. causes other actors on the world stage to feel threatened by the United States' unrivaled power and hesitant towards the U.S. as the unipolar power. Overall, Europe's reliance on the United States has decreased, as have their opinions of the United States.

Another strain that exists between the U.S. and other NATO members in the 21st century is due to the free rider problem. Many European states who are key NATO members have become less inclined towards military action when a conflict arises forcing the United States to feel inclined to pull the additional weight. As Europe has become increasingly demilitarized, public opinion has shifted to become hostile towards military action. Leaders in the United States have preferred European partners to shoulder a larger portion of the responsibility required to maintain the liberal world order, especially as NATO has significantly increased. With this lack

of cohesion NATO has gone from an alliance with considerable capability to one that resembles an inclusive club.

A classic critique of NATO from the United States perspective is that for far too long many European members have not been contributing their fair share to the alliance in terms of defense spending. As I mentioned above, this is often referred to as the free rider problem.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, as NATO expands Eastward the alliance accumulates states which it is then bound to protect without necessarily gaining the resources needed to do so. Complaints about this European free rider problem has recently been employed by President Trump, but they are not a new phenomenon in the post-post Cold War era. However, a common counter argument to the perceived inequality of monetary contributions between the United States and European countries is that there is no incentive for other members to increase spending when the United States continues to supply the alliance with ample resources or “subsidize them”<sup>30</sup> as Stephen Walt criticizes in his article.

Additionally, former Defense Secretary, Bob Gates spoke about the European reluctance to sufficiently staff and fund their militaries in a speech in 2010. Gates, who was initially appointed under former president George W. Bush and then served throughout the Obama administration, viewed the European reluctance to take on a proportionate share of the operational burden as "an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace."<sup>31</sup> Gates also said, “The demilitarization of Europe – where large swaths of the general public and political

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<sup>29</sup>Stephen Walt, “NATO Isn’t What You Think It Is” from Foreign Policy Magazine

<sup>30</sup>Stephen Walt, “NATO Isn’t What You Think It Is” from Foreign Policy Magazine

<sup>31</sup>Remarks delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates. “NATO Strategic Concept Seminar (Future of NATO)”. National Defense University, February 23, 2010.



class are averse to military force and the risks that go with it – has gone from a blessing in the 20th century to an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace in the 21st.”<sup>32</sup>

Another point of contention amongst NATO members has been the overall expansion of the alliance. While some members believed that NATO expansion would create a buffer zone of peace and transform the purpose of the alliance into the post-Cold War era and the post-post Cold War era, it in practice has not. In all, the Eastward expansion of NATO can be seen as a catalyst to the tensions and conflict that has arisen between Russia and Ukraine. While those in positions of power in Washington view the Eastward expansion of NATO as non-threatening towards Russia, this sentiment is not shared by Russia itself. Beginning in 2003, Western European powers extended their influence further as uprisings against pro-Russian regimes were aided in both Georgia and Ukraine. There was direct US and EU aid given in an effort to support electoral and judicial reform and encourage the mobilization of society. In 2004 NATO accepted 7 new members which set precedent in placing NATO’s reach directly on Russia’s border. What was most alarming or rewarding (depending which side you are on) about this specific wave of expansion was that the previously standing CFE treaty did not apply to the three Baltic states that were incorporated into NATO. Therefore, this treaty, which aimed to prevent any country from gaining the weapons necessary to commence an offensive war did not hold true to the very countries directly on Russia’s doorstep. In other words, NATO had the right to deploy the offensive means they saw necessary into the Baltic region. It should come as no shock that a move like this, in accordance with the realist line of thought, would be a cause of concern to any leader, but especially Vladimir Putin.

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<sup>32</sup>Remarks delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates. “NATO Strategic Concept Seminar (Future of NATO)”. National Defense University, February 23, 2010.

Three short years later, the standing threat was bolstered when the Bush administration announced plans to establish a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe with the goal of protecting the region from an Iranian led nuclear attack. Putin met this announcement with the proposition to construct a joint radar system which was met with US rejection. With these two actions back to back, this direct threat to Russia's territory and security prompted Putin to view NATO as, "a real threat and an unpredictable situation for Russia"<sup>33</sup>, while also viewing the United States as, "taking advantage of the situation to build up their own system of military bases along our borders".<sup>34</sup>

Merely a year after this NATO affirmed that Ukraine and Georgia would be the next Eastern European countries offered membership. This critical move was the most threatening to Russian security. Several Western European NATO members opposed this move as Ukraine stands as an important buffer between Russia and the impending threat of NATO influence. According to U.S. policy makers, Russia responded to this expansion by using, "its political, economic and military power to undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighboring countries, flouted international legal norms, and destabilized the European security order".<sup>35</sup> Needless to say, this provocative expansion has unraveled further and serves as a contentious issue that undermines American dominance.

### **NATO As a Source of Contention: Perceptions of Russia**

Russia as it stands today is far less threatening to the world, most importantly the U.S., than the Soviet Union was prior to 1991. In accordance to polls published in the U.S. and current Western media propaganda, we can see that Russia is not viewed as high up on the list of global

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<sup>33</sup>President Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly" April 26, 2007.

<sup>34</sup>President Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly" April 26, 2007.

<sup>35</sup>Remarks at Atlantik Brücke: "U.S., Germany, & NATO Are Moving Forward Together". Delivered by US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter in Berlin, Germany. June 22, 2015.

threats in comparison to the rise of China and the spread of terrorism.<sup>36</sup> From Russia's position, it has been a complex feat to gain standing in the new unipolar world order that emerged at the close of the Cold War. In an effort to fit into this post-Cold War era, Russia's Political elite have focused on the concept of multipolarity as the key to international stability. However, this multipolarity, in their view, assumes Russia to be at one of the influential poles. Jeffery Mankoff argues in his book, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, that "Moscow's interactions with other parts of the world are conditional upon the state of relations with the Western community".<sup>37</sup> This sentiment leads us to believe that Russian foreign policy is, or at least was, largely made with considerations of the West's perceptions in mind. However, the West has not reciprocated this view towards Russia since the end of the Cold War and has instead alienated Russia. This is due to the fact that the West views Russia lower down the totem pole of threats. Especially in comparison to the likes of al Qaeda, nuclear weapons and capabilities, and global climate change.

If an assumption is made that all states in the international order are seeking integration with the West and the benefits that are entailed, then a level of hypocrisy appears on behalf of the United States. Mankoff believes that a double standard exists around the issue of democracy and Russia is the victim. We can observe that on the one hand the U.S. has relations with numerous nondemocratic states like China, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, and on the other hand, the U.S. continues to view Russia alternatively, like an outsider due to its failure of democratization.

Though the United States' perceptions towards Russia have shifted, Russia's national interests are still deeply threatened by NATO expansion. Since the collapse of the USSR in

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<sup>36</sup>Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics and Policy. Study in an article entitled, "The World Facing Trump: Public Sees ISIS, Cyberattacks, North Korea As Top Threats". January 12, 2017.

<sup>37</sup>Jeffery Mankoff, "Russian Foreign Policy; The Return of Great Power Politics", Chapter 1, page 17.

1991, states around Russia's border have aimed to establish their own identity and thus have become a contested zone. This presents a pressure point for the Kremlin as they do not want to see these impugned states adopt Western ideologies while positioned along Russia's border. This fear is augmented by the threat of NATO expansion to these states because then Western military power on top of Western ideology will stand directly along Russia's border. As a precautionary measure, Russia has acted indignantly and sought to keep these former states from becoming entry points for hostile forces and Western military might. As a consequence, these contended states have received the worst of Russia's assertive foreign policy. President Putin has shared his concerns regarding NATO's continued Eastward expansion at the end of 2019 during a NATO summit in London.<sup>38</sup> Predominantly, the issue arose that while NATO's expansion continues, it serves as a direct and dire threat to Russia. However, in line with the realist ideology, it should only be expected that Russia would then act in a manner to protect themselves from such a threat.

NATO exists as a Western influenced alliance that continues to move closer to Russia's borders in a somewhat taunting manner. The realist theory purports that when an actor is being threatened, they should and could react to that threat. Specifically, in accordance with Stephen Walt's view, the actor being threatened could respond by balancing or bandwagoning with the existing threat. Putin's actions in Ukraine from the realist viewpoint, it seems as though they are a rational response to the strategic pressure his country faces from NATO as an encroaching military alliance. Regardless of whether you align with the Walt or Waltz outlook on the realist theory, defensive realism prioritizes state security when conducting foreign policy. State security is maximized and achieved when there is a stable balance of power amongst the players in the

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<sup>38</sup>Reuters World News, "Putin Criticizes NATO Expansion as Alliance Holds London Summit" By Vladimir Soldatkin and Alexander Marrow

international system. If we expect each state to prioritize their own survival, then Putin's reactions to NATO's expansion are valid because it has threatened the security and interests of Russia. Therefore, we can see him, in accordance with this theory, acting rationally. Why is it then, that we don't? Why are American leaders often credited for acting to protect and maintain the United States' security, but other leaders are punished and chastised for doing the very same thing for their country?

I would now like to explore the threat of geography as an alternative factor to explain Russia's reactions to NATO expansion, a reaction the West views as threatening. I would first like to discuss the geographical misfortunes Russia has and still is suffering from as many of the responses to NATO action stem from past tensions. I will outline a few points concerning Russia's geography and then I will explore how those connect to NATO's Eastward expansion.

Travelling briefly and swiftly back through time, Author Tim Marshall provides a recount of the land invasions from the West that Russia has suffered from in the past 500 years.<sup>39</sup> Russia's expansive land mass has been invaded by: the Poles in 1605 when they came across the European Plain, the Swedes under Charles XII in 1707, the French under Napoleon in 1812, and the Germans in World War 1 (1914) and 2 (1941).<sup>40</sup> In the 18th century, Peter the Great expanded Westward, occupying Ukraine and the Carpathian Mountains, enabling the Russians to defend itself from attackers approaching from the Baltic Sea. Now, starting in the Arctic, there was a defensive ring around Moscow. It came down from the Arctic to the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and up to the Urals.

When NATO was formed in 1949, it consisted of the U.S., UK, France, Canada, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands, Denmark, Luxembourg, Portugal, Iceland, and Norway. Essentially,

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<sup>39</sup>Tim Marshall, *The Atlantic*, "Russia and The Curse of Geography".

<sup>40</sup>Tim Marshall, *The Atlantic*, "Russia and The Curse of Geography".

the United States had created a Western influenced bloc to serve as a military alliance and check against the Soviet Union. Considering the multitude of land invasions from the West Russia has suffered from in the past it comes as no surprise that they wanted to secure their Western border by establishing sympathetic regimes in countries like Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia.<sup>41</sup>

However, when the USSR fell in 1991 the physical borders of Russia shrank, so did the notion of borders protected through buffer zones. Notably, in 1999 NATO accepted three more nations into the alliance: Poland, Czech Republic (formerly Czechoslovakia), and Hungary. These three particular countries had been key allies to the Soviet Union through the Warsaw pact during the Cold War.<sup>42</sup> The Warsaw pact had allowed Russia to have some support and standing in terms of military alignment of powers to counter the Western bloc of NATO in the early part of the Cold War.

Another country that provided an actual buffer zone to the Soviet Union was Ukraine. Up until this point, Russia had enjoyed a sense of security thanks to a buffer zone provided by Soviet influenced and controlled Ukraine. However, in Ukraine's post-independence era, relations with Russia have been turbulent. The idea of this pre-existing buffer zone thus stringently contingent on a pro - Russian government leading Ukraine and discouraging any EU or NATO aspirations which would threaten Russian national interest. This security was threatened in 2014 as domestic protests in the capital of Kyiv resulted in the resignation of a pro-Russia leader, Viktor Yanukovich, overall threatening Russia's agenda. In response, Putin, "Could have respected the territorial integrity of Ukraine, or he could have done what Russian leaders have done for centuries with the bad geographic cards they were dealt."<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Putin's choice to annex

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<sup>41</sup>"NATO: Seeking Russia's Destruction Since 1949" by Gary Leupp, *Counter Punch*.

<sup>42</sup>"NATO: Seeking Russia's Destruction Since 1949" by Gary Leupp, *Counter Punch*.

<sup>43</sup>Tim Marshall, *The Atlantic*, "Russia and The Curse of Geography".

Crimea appears as a response to a threat, and as a way to prevent NATO from encroaching further on Russia's borders. In that light, Russia's actions are in line with the realist perspective and Russia is reacting to a threat emanating from American power. In a position of unipolarity, the United States as the leading global power has to act with caution and restraint otherwise its aggressive actions will threaten other states. These other actors will then take countermeasures to protect their own security which will ultimately undermine the United States' position of power. To that end, the United States should only use power as a last resort so that other states feel secure enough to not take countermeasures, securing the United States' position as the dominant power.

### **Post-Cold War: Love - Hate Relations Between Russia and The United States**

As I stated in the beginning of this chapter, my later case studies will focus on specific instances in which the U.S. has acted aggressively and in an unrestrained manner in order to analyze how these actions threaten the unipolar dominance of the U.S. on the world stage. However, in this chapter, and through my case study of NATO, I am looking at the overall existence and role of NATO in the world order as a threat to Russia.

In this role as a direct threat, NATO prompts a reaction from Russia, likely in an aggressive manner. This reaction by Russia has been viewed by the U.S. and other Western viewers as assertive and threatening. In essence we are witnessing a vicious cycle in which the U.S. acts in line with the realist theory to protect its own security and interests which is also seen as aggressive and unrestrained. Other actors, in this case, other great powers like Russia, view U.S. actions as threatening to their security and interests so they too act in line with the realist theory. However, those reactions are then viewed unfavorably by the U.S. and seen as aggressive or threatening to U.S. interests. Thus, a hypocritical, vicious cycle prevails.

In an effort to uncover the root of this vicious cycle, I have looked to the immediate post-Cold War era when NATO and the EU were eager to welcome the newly freed states into their alliances. These previously socialist economies would need to meet certain requirements. They needed to establish a democracy, improve their human rights records, and reform their infrastructure and military. For these poor and underdeveloped countries these were extremely stringent alterations. What became evident was that the strict requirements NATO held for admission were not achievable for the Eastern European countries. However, if these states were not admitted into this Western led alliance, they would either fall into chaos or back under Russian influence. This was not a risk the West was willing to take. As a result, Eastern European states that were not fully eligible were admitted into NATO. This addition meant that NATO's influence, reach, and Europe's security perimeter was extended Eastward, directly towards Russia.

For the Eastern European states that were given admittance into NATO, they now benefitted from standing safely within the NATO security net, providing them military modernization and a higher standard of living. This was highly attractive to other, even more Eastern laying European states like Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and Georgia that were less qualified than the previously admitted Eastern European states. More importantly, these states are located closer to the Russian border. If they are admitted into NATO, their standing within the NATO security net and access to military Western protection would further threaten and antagonize Russia.

Another root of the realist fueled vicious cycle between the U.S. and Russia lies in an essence of mistrust between two leading politicians. In the final days of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev and former U.S. Secretary of State, James Baker met. This meeting evokes



trust issues between the two great powers and affects this vicious cycle because Gorbachev agreed to East Germany's incorporation into NATO and the withdrawal of troops from East Germany<sup>44</sup> in return for Secretary Baker's promise that NATO would not move Eastward. However, in 1993 under the Clinton administration NATO began the process of extending membership to Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary. I argue that this disregard for Baker and Gorbachev's informal agreement has set the tone and precedent for the post-Cold War relationship between the U.S. and Russia. This relationship is characterized by mistrust from both actors, and as we will later see, each actor viewing the other as a provoker of instability which threatens the security and national interest of the other.

Not long after this disregard for Russia's national interest and security, which is threatened by NATO expansion, NATO intervened in the Bosnian War on the grounds of humanitarian concerns. NATO conducted airstrikes against the Serbs who were also Russia's allies. This intervention, though projected by the West to be borne from humanitarian concerns, was more so due to NATO's goal of asserting dominance in Eastern Europe than with aiding Kosovo. Eventually, in 1999, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic were officially offered membership into NATO. As a result, a daunting military presence was constructed in Central Europe which was engineered by strong Western forces. Furthermore, this direct expansion of the NATO alliance antagonized a skeptical and weak Russia.

In utilizing this approach of intervention due to humanitarian concerns, the U.S. was able to deploy NATO in a new post-cold war era. However, I would argue that this precursor was grossly exaggerated as a means to gain entry into this region and to bolster public support for intervention on the domestic front. This action would have never occurred during the Cold War

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<sup>44</sup> Australian Institute of International Affairs, "Threat or Threatened? Russian Foreign Policy in the Era of NATO Expansion" by Alexander Thalys. May 3, 2018.

because Yugoslavia was positioned behind the Iron Curtain, therefore off limits to Western powers. In looking at NATO's intervention in the Bosnian war from a Waltz lens, it is crucial to understand that Yugoslavia was a place in which the Soviet Union had a strong influence. Yet, with the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, the counterforce to the United States was eliminated, and thus the victor was able to act in an unrestrained manner. Due to the elimination of one pole in the bipolar world order, the United States found itself existing in a unipolar world in which they were able to act in a more free and foolish manner. The only thing that will constrain this freedom to act and do as one pleases, is a counter force.

The Walt approach to analyzing this conflict differs from Waltz's because it is believed that the U.S. can invoke agency and show self-restraint for its own good. Walt believes that the U.S. will be aware that if they were to act stupidly, there will be counter reactions to their unconstrained actions. Furthermore, the U.S. can overcome this expectation that they will act stupidly because they are aware that if an actor acts stupidly, they will appear more threatening to other states and undermine their own power.

### **Present Day: NATO's Relevance?**

In today's climate the very existence of NATO is a contentious topic. After analyzing NATO, it is evident that the alliance is suffering from an identity crisis. If the main function of this military alliance was to contain and defeat the Soviet Union, then mission accomplished. Yet NATO still exists, what now is the purpose? In a post-Soviet, unipolar world order what are the implications of NATO existing?

Russia, serving as another crucial piece to this puzzle, regards NATO as a dire and direct threat to its security. In line with the defensive realist position and view on international politics, Russia's goal in this post-post Cold War era is to hinder or halt NATO's continued Eastward

expansion. This goal does not necessarily mean Moscow yearns to reclaim its lost territory or rebuild its long-lost empire. Rather, the political elite in Russia seek to protect their vulnerability and what little security they can control. As Stephen Walt said in 1998, “Nothing is permanent in international affairs, and NATO’s past achievements should not blind us to its growing fragility. Instead of mindlessly extending guarantees to every potential trouble spot, and instead of basing our foreign policy on a presumption of permanent partnership, it is time for Europe and the United States to begin a slow and gradual process of disengagement”.<sup>45</sup>

To that end, the usefulness and importance of NATO is brought into question. Why should an institution that lacks a current purpose and initiative be maintained? Should NATO’s purpose be updated to fit current needs, or should it be phased out? If each great power is acting to protect their own security interests is there a path forward that avoids a direct standoff? While Russia and NATO do share common interests signaling an eventual merger, there is the tiny caveat of Russia’s inability to uphold human rights and democracy that forces NATO to remain skeptical. On top of that, in the more recent post-post Cold War era Russia has become more hostile. Though it is very evident Eastward NATO expansion was the catalyst for this tension, Russia now embodies an actor that seeks to undermine stability and confidence across societies. What has become clear to me, is that NATO, as it stands threatens Russia. That threat emanates from an alliance which was specifically formed to contain and counter Russia’s predecessor. It seems only logical that tension, hostility, and conflict lay across any path forward for either body.

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen M. Walt, “The Ties That Fray: Why Europe and America are Drifting Apart”. *The National Interest*. December 1, 1998.

## Concluding Thoughts

NATO, since the end of the Cold War, exists in a unipolar world order. Through the realist perspective this means that as the main superpower, the U.S. can act in an unrestrained manner because they do not need to worry about potential threats from other great powers. In other words, the United States can advocate for continued NATO expansion, even though in doing so Russia's security and national interests are threatened. Conversely, when a bipolar or multipolar world exists great powers have no choice but to act in accordance with others. For example, during the Cold War, when a bipolar world did exist the United States was forced to act in a restricted and calculated manner when dealing with arising threats. The United States had to act cautiously because they were directly opposing another major world power, the Soviet Union. If one power was to misstep, miscalculate, or act foolishly the result would be an outright war. This was the case during the Cold War; therefore, NATO expansion was not as rapid and did not include actors that existed in such close proximity to Russia's border.

The latest potential candidate for NATO admittance is Ukraine. However, it has been reported through Western news sources that even the countries located farthest to the East (Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and Georgia) and bordering Russia, are eager to join the alliance.<sup>46</sup> The induction of any or all of these four countries into NATO would be within the U.S. interests because it would create a tighter Western constraint around Russia thus diminishing the likelihood of Russian expansionism. On the flipside, Russia would be directly threatened by this Eastward expansion as it would bring this alliance directly onto Russia's border with Ukraine. The question then arises of how far East can NATO expand until it is in direct contact with a resentful and resurgent Russia? How deep within Russia's sphere of influence will this Western

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<sup>46</sup>"NATO: Seeking Russia's Destruction Since 1949" by Gary Leupp, *Counter Punch*.

dominated alliance go? Strategically speaking, the further east NATO expands, the closer it gets to threatening Russia's security and national interests.

A Realists argument would believe that presently, there is no reason for NATO to exist. In large part this is due to the fact that there is no longer a common enemy, the Soviet Union, to give the organization purpose. Due to the change in the overall structure of the international order with the downfall of a bipolar world to the emergence of a unipolar world, the external threat of the Soviet Union has been diminished. The question still lingers then, why does NATO still exist?

I see the answer here not as black or white, to keep or do away with NATO. But rather, allow for a new NATO to emerge, one with an updated and current purpose rather than one that suffers from the absence of a common danger. One that doesn't leave the fear of a power vacuum in which Kim Jong-un, Bashar Al Assad or Vladimir Putin can fill. NATO should continue to exist in order to fulfill its duty to protect human rights and democracy. However, if we can finally see that each and every actor is acting within their own self-interest to accumulate and protect their own security and power perhaps NATO and the world for that matter will benefit from an alliance 2.0.

#### **IV. Ukraine: A Threat on Russia's Front Door**

In this chapter I will focus on Ukraine as a strategic actor in the United States' unipolar world order. In the post-Cold War landscape Ukraine has been a point of contention between the United States and Russia. As I explored in the previous chapter, NATO expansion Eastward is considered to be a direct threat to Russia's security and national interests. In this chapter I will narrowly focus on Russia and the United States' interactions surrounding and regarding Ukraine as a post-Cold War proxy war. In the onset of the post-Cold War era, Ukraine opposed Russian dominance and became an independent actor in Europe and on the world stage. More recently, in the post-post Cold War era, Russia has sought to claim a position on the world stage and exert dominance in their region to protect their interests. Now, 30 years after the Cold War, there is a Western driven fear that Russia's involvement and behavior towards Ukraine is aggressive and threatening to the U.S. dominant world order. As I will discuss in this chapter, this Western driven viewpoint is the leading sentiment fueling the Eastward expansion of NATO towards admitting Ukraine into this military alliance which will further threaten Russian security and interest and thus provoke a reaction.

As I have established in earlier chapters, Realism asserts that states are the primary actors in the structure of international politics. Due to the lack of a sole authoritative figure, a state of anarchy exists. All actors are self-interested and focused on maintaining their power and security. States, as the primary actor, regardless of their region, seek to optimize their power and influence. It is also within the realist perspective to view the encroachment of other powers, especially rival powers, as direct and severe threats. Stephen Walt's strain of Realism remains as the leading narrative for my analysis of U.S. foreign policy surrounding the unipolar world order. As is purported by Walt, an action like the Eastward expansion of NATO, which seeks to enable

Ukraine to be a democratic, free market, Western value driven actor, appear as a direct threat to Russian national interests and security.

### **Background On Ukraine as a Key Actor**

Ukrainian independence from the Soviet Union occurred in the early days of the post-Cold War era. In August of 1991 Ukraine declared independence and in the same year President George H. W. Bush established a U.S. Peace Corps program specifically for the newly independent Ukraine. President Bush met with Ukrainian-American leaders to announce the Administration's support and belief of their independence.<sup>47</sup> Formal recognition was granted in December of 1991 after Gorbachev resigned and the Soviet Union officially fell, resulting in, "official diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Ukraine was established on January 23, 1992."<sup>48</sup> However, in the immediate post-Cold War landscape, the Bush administration's recognition of Ukraine as an independent state was complicated by the dark shadow and apprehension of nuclear weapons that were now on Ukrainian soil in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In this post-Cold War landscape, the primary foreign policy goal of the United States was to stabilize the nuclear capabilities that had been inherited from the Soviet Union, making Ukraine the owner of, "the world's third largest stock of strategic nuclear weapons".<sup>49</sup> From the Realist perspective, after the threat of Ukraine's nuclear arsenal was relinquished, there would be no reason for the United States to intervene in the domestic affairs of Ukraine, or treat the country as an American interest. In this sense, Ukraine became a weaker actor stuck in the shadow of the powerful Russia. However, as we will find out, this dynamic shifted in 2014 when

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<sup>47</sup>"After the Cold War: U.S. - Ukrainian Relations (1991-2000)", By Lee Trepanier. *Vogel In View*. March 24, 2017.

<sup>48</sup>"After the Cold War: U.S. - Ukrainian Relations (1991-2000)", By Lee Trepanier. *Vogel In View*. March 24, 2017.

<sup>49</sup>"After the Cold War: U.S. - Ukrainian Relations (1991-2000)", By Lee Trepanier. *Vogel In View*. March 24, 2017.

Russia invaded and annexed Crimea proving, “as Ukraine became a security issue for Russia, it also became a security issue for Realists”.<sup>50</sup>

For the Ukraine, their primary foreign policy goal was to gain substantial recognition as an equal partner in the contemporary U.S. - Ukraine relationship. In their great efforts to accomplish this feat, Ukraine sought to demonstrate to its neighbors in Europe and to the United States across the ocean, that it could conduct effective foreign policy in its newly independent nature. As early as 1992, Ukraine was integrated into organizations like NATO’s Cooperation Council and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).<sup>51</sup> These accomplishments were recognized when Ukrainian President Kravchuk visited the United States and the country was awarded “Most favored nation” by the Overseas Private Development Program as part of the Peace Corps.<sup>52</sup>

### **Ukraine’s Post Soviet Existence**

Ukraine’s post-Soviet existence placed the country in a larger geopolitical role. In this chapter I would like to highlight and discuss the year of 1994 and various events that occurred then, as well as two specific moments in Ukraine’s post-Soviet existence which drew in American attention and support. This increased attention towards Ukraine on behalf of the United States bolsters the proxy war landscape between the United States and Russia. I will first discuss the year of 1994, and then the Orange Revolution of 2004, and the Euromaidan of 2013/2014.

First, the year of 1994 is often viewed as an integral year for the burgeoning independent state. For starters, the American - Ukrainian Advisory Committee held its first meeting with

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<sup>50</sup>“The Surrealism of Realism: Misreading the War in Ukraine” by Alexander J. Motyl. *World Affairs*, Vol. 177, No. 5.

<sup>51</sup>OSCE Who We Are - History.

<sup>52</sup>“After the Cold War: U.S. - Ukrainian Relations (1991-2000)”, By Lee Trepanier. *Vogel In View*. March 24, 2017.



representatives including Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and U.S. Deputy of State Strobe Talbott. Members met with Ukrainian counterparts to discuss various recommendations for improving relations between the two countries, showing an interest on behalf of the United States in being involved in the newly independent Ukraine's future.

1994 was also a substantial year in regard to the nuclear capabilities the newly independent Ukraine gained. The U.S. provided Ukraine with economic aid, contingent on their relinquishing of their newly acquired nuclear arsenal. In the early months of 1994, Ukrainian President Kravchuk met with President Clinton and President Yeltsin in Moscow to sign over the nuclear arsenal to Russia in return for guarantees of European integration for security purposes and economic support.<sup>53</sup> Security Guarantees were met when newly elected Ukrainian President Kuchma attended the CSCE summit at the end of 1994 after signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty. There he obtained security assurances from Great Britain, Russia, the United States, China, and France that the territorial integrity of Ukraine would be respected, as would their independence. This is a defining moment for the newly independent Ukraine because the world's largest powers extended their acknowledgment and respect.

In 1994 Ukraine was also invited to join the newly created NATO security network known as the Partnership for Peace. President Clinton proposed this program as an initial step for a country with full NATO membership aspirations. On the international level, Ukraine received large amounts of monetary aid from the Group of Seven industrialized nations (G-7), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in an effort to implement market-oriented reforms in the country.

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<sup>53</sup>1994: The Year In Review, The Ukrainian Weekly. December 25, 1994. No. 52, Vol. 62.

From a Western viewpoint, the recognition Ukraine had accumulated throughout the year of 1994, set the country on a path towards full admissions into Western dominated alliances. While these aspects could be seen as helpful for a newly independent state, much of this Western led behavior sought to exert power and influence on the new weak actor in the unipolar world order. As a weaker and newly democratic state, the United States would be interested in the domestic happenings of Ukraine because an opportunity surfaces to extend influence and control. If all states are focused on their power and security, then it is within the foreign policy interests of the United States to extend its influence on this new and young actor on the world stage. However, due to the fact that these foreign policy initiatives on behalf of the United States would stand as a direct threat to Russia, which could ultimately pose as a larger threat to the U.S., action in Ukraine that would threaten Russia is foolish and ultimately undermines the interests of the United States.

Another defining moment in Ukraine's post-Soviet existence was the Orange Revolution in 2004. This revolution followed the disputative 2004 Presidential election in which Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovich were rival candidates. Yanukovich was the current Prime Minister and had received backing and support from Russian President Vladimir Putin and current Ukrainian President Kuchma. Yushchenko was considered to be the more Western leaning candidate due to his agenda of anti-corruption and favoring European integration and prospects of Ukraine joining NATO. When voting took place in 2004 there were multiple rounds of voting and allegations of electoral fraud leading Yushchenko and his supporters to not recognize the results. This prompted what became known as the Orange Revolution encompassing massive popular protests in multiple major cities across Ukraine. As a result, the election results that yielded Yanukovich as the winner were overturned and a re-vote was

conducted in which Yushchenko was the victor. This Revolution is credited for changing the nature and dynamic of the relationship between the United States and Ukraine. In the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, the Bush Administration provided support for what they presented as the pro-democratic forces, which is more accurately considered the pro-Western forces, by signing new trade acts and the Charter on Strategic Partnership, highlighting the importance of this relationship to their political agenda.

An additional defining moment in Ukraine's post-Soviet existence is referred to as the Euromaidan. Beginning in late 2013, turmoil seeped into the streets of the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. Protests continued in Kyiv's Independence Square and took a turn for the worst when civilians were killed in January, 2014.<sup>54</sup> In what would later be viewed as the collapse of the post-Cold War regional order in the wider Europe<sup>55</sup>, this moment of domestic rejection of the political elites due to social and economic failures and reported constraints on civil rights and liberties, posed as a fundamental shift in Ukraine's relationship with Russia and Russia's relationship with the rest of Europe.

The Euromaidan centered around opposition to President Yanukovich who stood as former President Yushchenko's successor and had assumed office in 2010. Yanukovich was considered to be pro-Russian whereas his predecessor was considered to be pro-Western. Ukrainians in Kyiv took to the streets to peacefully protest President Yanukovich's decision to not sign the European Union Association Agreement as it was believed this agreement would bring Ukraine into a closer relationship with Europe. These protests consisted of many forces joining together to make demands to the President and his cabinet. Amongst which was the

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<sup>54</sup>Open Society Foundations, "Understanding Ukraine's Euromaidan Protest".

<sup>55</sup>"Introduction: The Ukraine Crisis and Post - Post - Cold War Europe", By Derek Averre and Kataryna Wolczuk. *Europe Asia Studies* Volume 68, 2016, Issue 4.

demand for the adoption of laws so that European integration could become a reality. These demands were ignored resulting in further protests. This action further deepened the pro-Russia versus pro-European political agendas in Ukraine. For those Ukrainians who were more pro-European aligned, the rejection of this agreement compelled them to view their President and government with less legitimacy. Eventually, President Yanukovich fled the country and Parliament voted to have new elections which elected President Poroshenko and then a pro-reform coalition government later that year.

The Euromaidan is significant because it illustrates the desire of large numbers of Ukrainians to achieve a more pro-European and pro-democratic future for the country of Ukraine. It is also significant because this defining moment had the ability to dictate whether or not Ukraine would remain under Russian influence or embark on a path more closely aligned with the European Union. In protesting President Yanukovich's decision, many Western leaning Ukrainians took action in response to the political elite's perceived failure to reform Ukraine in the critical post-Soviet era and in the new light of independence. For many Ukrainians the corrupt practices and inefficiency within government echoed the past leadership under the Soviet Union. To many, the possibility for European integration appeared as a path towards a more democratic life and prosperity for the country in terms of modernization in the political and economic spheres.<sup>56</sup>

The Ukraine that emerged from the Maidan ultimately shifted from going in a more pro-Russia direction to taking a stronger pro-Western, pro-European and pro-democratic path. This shows that even while the country is deeply divided between East and West, Pro-Russia, Pro-European agendas, there is an underlying demand for modernization and Europization within the

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<sup>56</sup>“Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity: The Dynamics of Euromaidan” by Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park in the *Journal of Eurasian Studies* Volume 7, Issue 1.

country. The Euromaidan and its results were in line with Western, especially American propaganda which hailed the spread of democracy. It is protests like these that allow the United States to garner domestic and international support to engage directly in the affairs in Ukraine therefore threatening Russia.

The Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan illustrate instances in which civil society in large portions of Ukraine, mostly Western portions, seek a more Western European influenced future with the prospect of joining the EU and NATO. To that end, the Ukraine crisis illustrates the deep divisions within the country as to which direction the future should go. With that being said, Eastern civil society seeks to maintain the post independent order in which the interests of the ruling elites and oligarchs prevail. If Western aspirations are followed, then the United States would be involved from a foreign policy standpoint due to NATO expansion. As I have discussed in my prior chapter on NATO, the Eastward expansion of NATO serves as a threat to Russian Security. Therefore, if the United States were to act on those foreign policy initiatives it would be in direct threat to Russian national interests. I argue that this will ultimately undermine the United States' role as the dominant unipolar power.

Where I see a tension in the foreign policy goals of the United States and the realist framework lie within the differences between Ukraine's geopolitical significance and its strategic significance. Geopolitically, Ukraine is significant because if it is able to coexist next to Russia while securing its own borders, it can pose as a key to stability across Europe. Stability across Europe is within the United States' interest as the unipolar power. Yet, Ukraine also stands as an influential and strategic country to the United States as it presents an opportunity to insert influence in close proximity to Russia therefore serving as a check on overall Russian power and influence. From a realist standpoint, the United States would like to see a stable region as it is

beneficial to their overall national interest, but Russia would also like to see an unstable Ukraine for that same reason. An unstable Ukraine detracts U.S. and Western interest and allows Russia to exert more power and influence on their close lying neighbor. If Ukraine remains in an unstable state, the possibility of NATO expansion will diminish and, in that regard, Russia will succeed in protecting its security and national interest. With this in mind, the purpose of a Cold War proxy war in Ukraine seems more valid, or at least slightly more defensible.

### **Ukraine as a point of Contention in the Russia - U.S. Relationship**

Having been under Soviet Control for such a long period of time, there are a number of aspects tying the Ukraine and Russia together still today, a couple of which I will discuss below. Additionally, there are a number of attributes Ukraine possesses that I believe makes it attractive to both the United States and Russia in terms of their abilities to exert power and influence. I will discuss these below as well and outline how these factors affect the broader U.S. - Russia relationship in which both actors seek to maintain some form of influence in Ukraine as a strategic actor in the current world order.

First, Ukraine, like Russia faces a major challenge due to its geographical barriers, or lack thereof. As a result, Ukraine is vulnerable to threats from both the East and the West. Russia stands both more powerful and larger than Ukraine and lies directly on the Eastern border. It is therefore no surprise that in the post-Cold War era a principal foreign policy objective of the Ukraine has been to achieve strengthened, impenetrable borders. With this in mind, it would come as a strategic decision on behalf of Ukraine to join an alliance like NATO which would provide military support and strengthen the vulnerable border Ukraine shares with Russia.

Similarly, the geographical location of Ukraine is significant to both Eastern and Western powers as it allows Ukraine to contribute to the stability, peace, and overall security in the

region. Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security advisor under President Jimmy Carter credited the newly independent Ukraine as being significant because of its ability to alter the geopolitical structure of Europe. Brzezinski went as far to say that independent Ukraine, “is one of the three major geopolitical events of the twentieth century.”<sup>57</sup> To that end, it is worth noting that Ukraine possesses a number of attributes which makes it attractive to both Russia and Western powers. Firstly, it holds 5% of the entire world’s mineral resources in addition to possessing large oil and natural gas reserves. Ukraine is also made up of fine arable soil allowing it to be a suitable farming environment and attractive for agricultural development. Secondly, Ukraine’s geographic position allows it to utilize the Black Sea for trade and naval operations.

Another vulnerability faced by Ukraine lies within the population. The composition of the country is defined by regional variation in which the country is divided by the East and West and the respective influences and then also by religious cleavages.<sup>58</sup> The multi-ethnic composition of Ukraine’s population could present issues relating to separatism and nationalism which would threaten any sort of political, economic, or social stability.

For centuries Ukraine has been split by the East and West geographical divide as each side has been ruled by different states. At one point in time the Soviet Union controlled both sides which lead to a deeper regional divide in which Western and central Ukraine were influenced by Europe and Eastern and Southern Ukraine were influenced by Russia. This factor remained even after independence, threatening the overall unity of the country. This sinister regionalism eventually culminated and ignited the Orange Revolution. Though in the early years of independence the East and West divide was relatively peaceful due to prevailing pro-European unified identity, external pressures from Russia eventually encouraged action.

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<sup>57</sup>“After the Cold War: U.S. - Ukrainian Relations (1991-2000)”, By Lee Trepanier. *Vogel In View*. March 24, 2017.

<sup>58</sup>“After the Cold War: U.S. - Ukrainian Relations (1991-2000)”, By Lee Trepanier. *Vogel In View*. March 24, 2017.

Specifically, the deep cutting cultural and linguistic cleavages between the two regions fused with Russian separatist intentions.

A leading vulnerability that the Ukraine faces, and which deeply complicates the relationship between the U.S. and Russia is the young stage of independence and weak democracy the country currently exists in. Due to this weakness, Ukraine is very susceptible to outside forces and influences. From a U.S. foreign policy perspective this weakness opens up the possibility to impact Ukraine's domestic politics and further exert power and control in the region, ultimately serving as a check on the expansion of Russian power and influence. An example of this Russian influence that the United States seeks to curtail would be the pro-Russian separatist movements occurred in the Donbass region in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. These movements called for a union with Russia or in some cases, self-rule, which threatened the spread of democracy. To that end, Eastern Ukraine has since been plagued by reports of human rights abuses and the deterioration of the rule of law. The United States and the West as a whole responded to these conflicts in Eastern Ukraine with dismay and voiced their intentions to aid Ukraine militarily, directly through arms or monetarily.

However, in line with the Realist theory, a situation in which the United States arms Ukraine directly will surely threaten Russia, making the situation worse. In arming Ukraine, the United States is intensifying this conflict which further threatens Russia. A Ukraine that is supported by the United States with the goal of countering Russian action serves as a threat to Russia's security and their national interests. This is a blatant proxy war.

Yet again, a vicious cycle emerges in which the United States and Russia are engaged in a Cold War proxy war. This not only has the potential to physically harm the people of Ukraine, it also will harm the interests of both Russia and the United States. Three leading factors come to



light in the scope of this proxy war that I see as a direct to the United States' dominant role as a unipolar power.

Firstly, arming Ukraine will most likely not convince Moscow to work alongside Washington. Rather, due to the fact that both Russia and the U.S. are self-interested actors vying to protect their own security and power, they will view each other as a direct and dire threat.

Secondly, Russia has a stronger military than the Ukraine, even with U.S. aid. This stands as a major issue for Ukraine due to the fact that they directly border Russia therefore have no choice but to coexist with Russia. The United States arming Ukraine will cause Russia to react because they will feel as though their security is threatened. However, the Ukraine will be the weaker power forced to exist next to a hostile military power threatening their sovereignty.

Finally, as Stephen Walt proposes, due to the long standing history, security concerns, and geographical proximity between Russia and Ukraine, "Ukraine's fate is much more important to Moscow than it is to us [United States], which means that Putin and Russia will be willing to pay a higher price to achieve their aims than we will."<sup>59</sup> Russia has a more invested interest in the fate of Ukraine than the United States does and in keeping Ukraine within its sphere of influence for strategic concerns. To that end Russia is willing to go further in their actions to achieve their goals in the region than the United States is.

The very nature of this proxy war is divisive in that it is pushing Russia closer towards aligning with China to balance the threat of the West. This in no way is in the interest of the United States in the long term or short term. To prevent any escalation the United States and the West as a whole would benefit by convincing Russia that rather than endless NATO expansion,

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<sup>59</sup>“Why Arming Kiev Is a Really, Really Bad Idea” By Stephen M. Walt in *Foreign Policy Magazine*.

Ukraine should exist as a neutral state peacefully existing between Russia and Western influences, not threatening the security of either power.

While Russia has not greeted Ukrainian independence with open arms, the United States is acting in an unrestrained, foolish manner. As I mentioned above, an example of this foolish behavior is the United States' idea to arm Ukraine in response to aggression. While many American diplomats advocate sending Ukraine extensive military aid, scholars like Stephen Walt propel the notion forward that actions like these will appear as a direct threat towards Russian security and their ability to maintain power. In a previous article, Walt points out that the so-called Ukraine crisis, "began when the United States and European Union tried to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and into the West's sphere of influence"<sup>60</sup>, further illuminating the action, reaction nature of these foreign policy actions. As analyzers of foreign policy, this is compelling because in the long run a threat like this will in turn, directly admonish U.S. unipolarity. Henry Kissinger highlights this sentiment by pushing the notion that in this new geopolitical landscape that exists today, "it is a vital American interest to see to it that Eurasia not be controlled by a single power center"<sup>61</sup>. With that idea in mind, it is within American foreign policy interests to not further alienate Russia through forceful, threatening relations with Ukraine for fear that Russia will respond by increasing their power, reach, and threat in the region.

The introduction of an independent Ukraine is influential both politically and geopolitically because if other nations can maintain good relations with both Russia and Ukraine, then European stability as a whole will be strengthened. Walt points out that, "Russia is not an ambitious rising power like Nazi Germany or contemporary China; it is an aging, depopulating, and declining great power trying to cling to whatever international influence it still possesses and

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<sup>60</sup>“Why Arming Kiev Is a Really, Really Bad Idea” By Stephen M. Walt in *Foreign Policy Magazine*.

<sup>61</sup>“At Sea in the World” By Henry Kissinger. *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 1994.

preserve a modest sphere of influence near its borders”<sup>62</sup>, showing that Russia shares the same goal of the United States in terms of securing and protecting their borders and maintaining their sense of domestic power and security. Of course, the United States holds dear the added goal of maintaining its role as the unipolar power. A task which, if done by threatening other large powers, can and may be undermined. When all is said and done, Russia, like many other powers, seeks to protect itself and its vulnerabilities from other powers. With that in mind, the U.S. acting foolishly in Ukraine for no gain but to extend Western influence and invoke fear in other actors, threatens the overall stability and legitimacy of the unipolar world order.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Democracy in Ukraine is at a delicate and insecure phase which serves as a leading force in the desire to join the EU and NATO. Specifically, for Ukraine, NATO serves as a vital and attractive means to protect against a potentially aggressive and hostile Russia due to the access it provides to U.S. military protection. However, in terms of criteria, the fact that Ukraine is a relatively poor country, which lacks the necessary means to effectively contribute to the alliance, serves as a strong force acting against their case for admission. While the United States stands more or less in favor of admitting Ukraine into the coveted alliance, European members of NATO are wary due to the fear of antagonizing Russia and also the expenses that accompany this move.

Still, the integration of the Ukraine into NATO is within foreign policy interests of the United States because this would allow for a tighter Western influence which would serve as a check on Russian activity and power. Ukraine’s admission into the NATO alliance would permit the United States to react militarily to any aggressive action against Ukraine as any attack on a

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<sup>62</sup>“Why Arming Kiev Is a Really, Really Bad Idea” By Stephen M. Walt in *Foreign Policy Magazine*.

NATO member is an attack on all members. The potential for this military confrontation serves as a direct threat to Russian security. As Stephen Walt points out, the, “open-ended NATO expansion has done more to poison relations with Russia than any other single Western policy”.<sup>63</sup> In accordance with the Walt strain of the Realist view of international relations, the action taken to admit Ukraine into the NATO alliance would be foolish on behalf of the United States because it would stand as a direct and threatening move against Russia. A move Russia would then be expected to react and respond to, which would thoroughly threaten the United States’ position as the unipolar power.

Ukraine should be free to associate with the EU and benefit from multilateral relations, but the very nature of the NATO alliance stands as a threatening force to Russia. Therefore, if Ukraine was to join NATO, Russia, in efforts to protect their own power and security, would feel the need to act in response to this threat. To this end, a position of geopolitical ambiguity would serve Ukraine well as they would be able to entertain good relations with both Moscow and the West. In the broader geopolitical context, it is hard to say exactly how Russia would react on the world stage. Ukraine’s geography has positioned it as a smaller and weaker country, existing alongside a larger and more aggressive country.

By not joining an alliance like NATO, which stands as a direct tool against Russia, Ukraine can signal to Russia that they are not a threat. In this sense, the Realist viewpoints to Ukraine’s history and geographical location as the factors inhibiting Ukraine’s ability to emerge as a secure and powerful independent country.

Though Ukraine is a strategic country geopolitically, its failures are largely due to internal struggles with reform and nationalism. In line with Walt’s sentiments, countries acting in

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<sup>63</sup>“Why Arming Kiev Is a Really, Really Bad Idea” By Stephen M. Walt in *Foreign Policy Magazine*.

a self-interested manner, seeking to maintain power and security while existing in a state of anarchy, will only take interest in a conflict or geopolitical struggle for as long as they have something to gain. If the United States comes to the realization that Russia has more at stake and a deeper rooted fundamental interest in Ukraine, then it would be in the best interest of the U.S. to remove itself from this smaller scale battle in which its continued actions and use of force appear to be foolish and harmful to its long term unipolar dominance.

If the United States seeks to maintain its position as the dominant unipolar power on the world stage, it is best to act in a restrained manner. In utilizing this control, the United States is able to preserve its power and remain the dominant actor in the unipolar world order. In the end this is the goal worth fighting for.

In the next chapter I will analyze the Syrian civil war and ongoing conflict as another proxy war in which Russia and the United States continue to struggle to achieve a post-Cold War existence compatible with each other's view of their roles in the new international world order. I will show how the United States has acted in an unrestrained manner further threatening its role as the dominant unipolar power. In line with Walt's realist approach, I hope to show that the United States better serves its interests and can maintain its role as the unipolar power if it were to act with restraint on the world stage.

## V. Syria: In the Shadow of National Interests

In analyzing current U.S. - Russian interactions, the ongoing civil conflict in Syria can be viewed as an arena in which these two great powers are battling to assert their power and influence. This confrontation stems from the tempestuous relationship formed during the Cold War which has had lasting effects on the international world order. The ongoing civil war in Syria presents yet another scenario in which the United States and Russia are engaged in a Cold War proxy war to insert and protect their respective power and influence in the country and broader region. This chapter will focus on the U.S. - Russia relationship in the unipolar world order by analyzing the current situation in Syria.

Since 2011 Syria has been a battleground in which the United States and Russia have acted through internal actors in a conflict to protect each of their own interests and power. I will argue that the United States' involvement in this conflict is not only foolish but directly threatens their dominance and unipolar standing on the world stage. The strong sense of rivalry, mistrust, and overall negative relations that are present at the root of this proxy war between the United States and Russia intensified during the Cold War. From there, there are sentiments from both actors in which the citizens of each country do not trust the other country's leadership or motives. There seems to be a deeply rooted tendency for each actor to view the other in the worst light and react with harsher policy initiatives.

I would argue that this has created an endless cycle of conflict in which the United States and Russia compete to assert their power and dominance over a less significant third-party actor, just for the sake of countering the other power. I will assert that it is this cycle that compels the United States to act in a foolish manner which ultimately threatens their position as the current dominant unipolar power status. Though the intentions of the U.S. may be sincere and valid as

they seek to keep a check on growing Russian power and influence, the outcome is largely negative and detrimental to the long-term goal of prolonging American dominance and their role as the unipolar power.

### **Why Syria?**

While the United States possesses the strongest military capabilities in the world, it may come as a surprise that this military strength is not always used effectively to attain peace and protect stability. The ongoing civil war in Syria portrays this well, as Western leaders have acted in a manner that invokes widespread instability, further threatening the world order. Further along in this chapter, I will discuss in greater detail the previous events in Iraq and Libya which contributed to the decisive action on behalf of Russian leadership to intervene in the Syrian conflict in 2015. Currently, Russia stands as one of President Bashar al-Assad's leading allies which prompted Russian support in 2015 due to political and geopolitical drivers as well as military conditions. Russia realized that there was a dire threat to Assad's regime and if he were to fall, it would have severe implications on Russia's interests in the region and overall ramifications on security and stability.<sup>64</sup>

In both Iraq and Libya, the United States utilized an aggressive foreign policy approach which eventually toppled the leaders of both countries, leading to deep rooted instability and resentment towards the United States. With that in mind, a large factor behind Russia's adamant behavior and support of Assad in Syria stems from the fact that Russia does not want another scenario like Iraq and Libya in which widespread instability threatens the region and national interests.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>*RAND Corporation*, "Understanding Russia's Intervention In Syria" By Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist.

<sup>65</sup>"NATO: Seeking Russia's Destruction Since 1949: What is the Point of NATO Expansion?" by Gary Leupp, *Counter Punch*.

In the previous chapter I discussed the events that have occurred in Ukraine as a Cold War proxy war between Russia and the United States. In that scenario Russia sought to assert its dominance in order to maintain relations and influence in a country that is viewed as part of Russia's national heritage. As we can see in current U.S. foreign policy, those Russian efforts have come into conflict with perceived American interests and political agendas. The previous chapter and this current chapter both relate to Cold War proxy wars between the United States and Russia which have, and currently are, playing out in Ukraine and Syria. In both cases, American foreign policy makers are faced with the question of how to respond to Russia's actions they claim are to protect their national interests while also maintaining power and security.

However, the proxy war involving Ukraine differs from Syria because Russia directly shares a border with Ukraine and previously benefited from having Ukraine securely in its Soviet orbit. To that end, the Ukraine proxy war presents a politically controversial predicament for the United States to be in and affects how they should respond to Russia's geopolitical movements. The case of the proxy war in Ukraine presents Russia with the geopolitical problem in which a former Soviet state threatens actions that would affect and endanger Russian security. The Syrian proxy war is different because neither the United States nor Russia share a direct border with Syria. Syria is also not a former Soviet state that presents a current danger to Russian security. Russia, however, argues that their national interest in Syria stems from the presence of their naval port, Tartus on the Western border. Again, this proxy war positions the United States in a politically contentious position when questioning to what degree U.S. foreign policy should directly oppose Russian actions in Syria.



I will now return to my analysis of the American foreign policy failures in Libya and Iraq to provide a deeper context for one explanation why the Syrian conflict and the broader post-Cold War proxy war between the U.S and Russia has materialized. In both of these instances the United States led a swift and aggressive intervention, overthrow and then occupation to remove a leader and/or regime that did not align with American interests. This, of course, was the official narrative given to the American viewer and the public but not the factual one. It is important to remember that for much of the actual Cold War, leaders in Washington were committed to intervening in the politics of minor powers to prevent them from adopting the communist ideology. In essence, we can say the actions of the U.S. were therefore justified as they were responding to a current and vital threat.

However, it was within this period that the United States adopted an approach guided by social engineering on a global scale.<sup>66</sup> This approach entailed large amounts of resources, money, and boots on the ground to assist friendly governments and help them maintain power because it was in the best interest of the United States. As Realist John Mearsheimer explains, social engineering is extremely difficult and often doomed from the start. We must understand that in an intervention is it often the case that the country intervening is not fully aware of the other country's politics or culture, let alone the language. When military action is brought into the mix, "the ensuing violence will make the invading country look like an oppressor, further complicating its efforts to promote positive change."<sup>67</sup> In line with self-determination, countries desire to control their own fate. Therefore, the United States' Cold War policy of intervention into the politics of minor powers to contain the spread of communism has had negative effects in the post-Cold War era.

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<sup>66</sup>John Mearsheimer, *Realism and Restraint*. P. 19.

<sup>67</sup>John Mearsheimer, *Realism and Restraint*. P. 20.

Also, in the post-Cold War were the events of September 11, 2001. These tragedies forever influenced American domestic sentiments and foreign policy initiatives. Since the 9/11 attacks, supporting the War on Terror justified American military action aimed at combating terrorist threats. With that same sentiment, military action to invade Iraq was authorized due to the alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction and suspected terrorist activity.<sup>68</sup> The legitimacy of this invasion is dependent on the truth and validity of the accusations which led to the official decision to invade and occupy Iraq after president Saddam Hussein fell from power.<sup>69</sup> In the aftermath, all aspects of this foreign policy failure were criticized and negatively assessed by the international community. The ensuing American occupation in Iraq was met with widespread resentment from locals.<sup>70</sup> A large portion of this failure can be attributed to the unrealistic objective to implement Western democracy which was rejected by most Iraqis. The crucial outcome of this and the connection to my argument lies in the fact that the war in Iraq reinforced concerns the larger global community had about unchecked U.S. primacy and power. This also led to widespread and long-term instability in Iraq and the broader Middle East. President Bush's unilateral aggressive action in Iraq forced other actors to fear their own security in light of U.S. decisions and then question the role of U.S. primacy.

Libya, like Iraq, was led by an individual the United States deemed as harmful to their national interests and the safety and security of others. In 2011, there was a NATO led intervention in Libya which resulted in the killing of then dictator, Muammar Qaddafi. When deciding what course of action to take through the United Nations, Russia had chosen to support

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<sup>68</sup>“Everyone Says The Libya Intervention Was a Mistake. They’re Wrong” By Shadi Hamid at *the Brookings Institute*.

<sup>69</sup>“Invaders, Allies, Occupiers, Guests” A Brief History of U.S. Military Involvement in Iraq” By Miriam Berger in *The Washington Post*.

<sup>70</sup>“U.S. Wars In Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen: What Are The Endstates?” by Anthony H. Cordesman at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

the Western proposed plans and therefore did not veto the United Nations Security Council Resolution which would allow any measures necessary to be taken to protect citizens under attack. In other words, intervention for humanitarian concerns, which then surfaced as a cover for convenient regime change.<sup>71</sup> However, as events unfolded the UN resolution appeared more as a tool to justify NATO's attack on Qaddafi's forces and then the overthrow of his government.

Again, like we saw in Iraq, the larger global community witnessed the United States acting in an aggressive, unrestrained manner to forward their own agenda while presenting the narrative that they were acting in response to humanitarian concerns. By acting in this manner, the United States is further perpetuating instability in the region and once again, this unchecked U.S. primacy and power forced other actors to fear their own security.<sup>72</sup> This in turn affects Russia because U.S. ignited instability in the Middle East is not within their national interest.

It is in instances like these that the hypocritical foreign policy of the United States creates a tension in which their dominant role as a unipolar power is challenged. The nature of this unrestrained behavior casts a shadow of doubt on the moral standard of the United States and the overall credibility and legitimacy of American primacy and power. From Stephen Walt's position of Realism, this behavior more importantly appears as threatening to other actors who may then react, and in turn undermine U.S. power.<sup>73</sup> If the United States continues to act without restraint it will foster foreign resentment which will increasingly threaten U.S. power and the sacred role as the unipolar power.

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<sup>71</sup>*RAND Corporation*, "Understanding Russia's Intervention In Syria" By Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, page 6.

<sup>72</sup>"Everyone Says The Libya Intervention Was a Mistake. They're Wrong" By Shadi Hamid at *the Brookings Institute*.

<sup>73</sup>"International Relations:One World, Many Theories" By Stephen Walt

## **Background on Syria's Civil Conflict**

The conflict in Syria presents a highly fractioned, complex arrangement of interests, actors, and alliances. Within this convoluted framework comes chaos and instability. At the surface, there is a split between the pro-Assad forces and the opposition forces. The pro-Assad forces are further supported by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah and mostly dominate Western Syria.<sup>74</sup> The opposition forces themselves are quite divided; they include rebel, sectarian, and ethnic factions. In direct opposition to the Assad regime is what is known as the Syrian opposition which is made up of groups like the Free Syrian Army and gains support from Turkey and Al-Nusra Front. Also standing in opposition to the Assad regime is the sect referred to as Rojava or the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF). Predominantly in Eastern Syria are the more moderate and secular Arab rebel factions like the Free Syrian Army. In Northern Syria, along the border with Turkey, lies the Kurdish forces that are present in this conflict and the SDF which are composed of individuals from the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). The main support for these groups are global major powers like the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. Up until recently, the United States has been a strong force backing the Syrian Kurdish fighters. However, this complicated the United States' relationship with its NATO ally, Turkey. The Turkish government views the YPG as a threat to Turkey due to their alignment to the PKK, which is a Kurdish terrorist group in Turkey, fighting for an independent land for Kurds in Turkey. As a result of their own civil war with the Kurds, Turkey has become more involved in the conflict in Syria.

The conflict in Syria is tightly connected to the conflict and threat stemming from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, more commonly known as ISIS. The basis for American and

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<sup>74</sup>“The Case For and Against a “Realist” Strategy in Syria” By Anthony H. Cordesman and Aram Nerguizian at the Center For Strategic & International Studies.

overall Western policy in this civil conflict is geared towards stopping the expansion of ISIS which traces its origins back to Al Qaeda in Iraq as an offshoot of the terrorist group that attacked the U.S. on September 11, 2001.<sup>75</sup> In the timeline of charting the rise of ISIS, we can see the group's existence spanning back to the Sunni Awakening of 2006, which occurred in part as a response to the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Due to the fact that Saddam Hussein had the support of the Sunni minority in Iraq, the U.S. expected to gain the support of the Shia majority after the 2003 invasion and subsequent overthrow. However, this was not the case. Rather, the Shia population that benefited from the regime change countered U.S. power, forcing the U.S. to align with Sunni groups willing to give their support. The Overthrow of Saddam Hussein produced a power vacuum in which Al Qaeda Iraq attempted to lead by strict theocratic rule.<sup>76</sup> Part of the Sunni Awakening saw other Sunni militias successfully rising up against Al Qaeda Iraq, ultimately defeating them. These Sunni militia groups, who were once insurgents but were now U.S. allies, received American military support through weapons and training.

By 2010 the conditions in Iraq were ripe for Al Qaeda Iraq to reemerge. It was also around this time that civil conflict erupted in Syria, further bestowing an environment suitable for Al Qaeda Iraq to expand.<sup>77</sup> Eventually these reemerging remnants of Al Qaeda Iraq, united with other despondent Iraqis and ultimately formed ISIS in 2013.<sup>78</sup> The reemergence of this Sunni coalition is especially critical through the scope of the Syrian civil conflict because its goals, in part, were to overthrow the Shia Syrian Assad regime. ISIS stems from an extremist

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<sup>75</sup>“The Evolution of ISIS: From Rogue State to Stateless Ideology” By Megan Specia. *The New York Times*.

<sup>76</sup>“ISIS, a history: How The World’s Worst Terror Group Came To Be” By Zack Beauchamp. *Vox*.

<sup>77</sup>“ISIS, a history: How The World’s Worst Terror Group Came To Be” By Zack Beauchamp. *Vox*.

<sup>78</sup>“Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State” By Cameron Glenn, Mattisan Rowan, John Caves, and Garrett Nada. *The Wilson Center*.

branch of Sunnism which is strictly opposed to Shiite rule in Syria. Within the scope of the Syrian civil war, ISIS appears as one of the main actors fighting for influence and power.

The United States entered this conflict fiercely opposing both ISIS and the Assad regime and has been committed to destroying both. However, this in and of itself presents a severe dilemma for U.S. policy makers. If U.S. forces were to first remove Assad from power, a vacancy and power vacuum would emerge in which ISIS may attempt to extend their caliphate and assume more power in Syria.<sup>79</sup> If the United States chose to first destroy ISIS in Syria then they would essentially remove one of Assad's fiercest opponents. ISIS stands at the head of radical anti-Assad movements and is also at war with the government of Iraq. It is within U.S. interests to see stability in the region; therefore, the United States is concerned with the stability of Iraq, making ISIS an enemy and threat to be dealt with under American foreign policy. While there are severe consequences of pursuing either the elimination of the Assad regime in Syria or the threat of ISIS, it is crucial to note that the effect of either of these two will primarily be felt by the weaker regional actors than by the United States. More specifically, due to the mistakes of and inabilities of leaders like Assad, terrorists' groups are exploiting weaknesses in Syria which threatens American interests and thus poses a host of regional and now international threats.<sup>80</sup>

In the larger picture of U.S. foreign policy, what was once a civil conflict based on sectarian divides in Syria has now evolved into an international crisis. To that end, the United States and Russia come head to head in an effort to exert their power and influence in the region. However, what the troubled history of ISIS has shown is that the United States repeatedly acts foolishly and in an unrestrained manner which ends up threatening other actors and more

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<sup>79</sup>“Everyone Says The Libya Intervention Was a Mistake. They’re Wrong” By Shadi Hamid at *the Brookings Institute*.

<sup>80</sup>“The Regional Impact of U.S. Policy Toward Iraq and Syria” By Tamara Cofman Wittes from *The Brookings Institute*. Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on The Middle East and North Africa.

importantly, its own role as the unipolar power. There is a direct line that can be drawn from the United States' invasion and occupation in Iraq to the disastrous rise of ISIS. In this light, the unrestrained behavior of the U.S lead to the emergence of a terrorist organization which poses as a global threat the U.S. is now engaged in a proxy war to eliminate.

### **Why Are These Actors Interested?**

Russian intervention in Syria is motivated by political and militaristic factors, but at the root is more geopolitical than nationalistic. For starters, Russia has had relations with Syria since 1971 when the Soviet Union implemented the only Russian military base in the region, located in Tartus<sup>81</sup>. This naval base therefore serves as Russia's only foothold in the Mediterranean and in the overall region. Additionally, the naval base in Tartus is located in a predominantly Alawite Shia province where Syrian dictator, Bashar al-Assad, comes from. If the Assad regime were to fall and be replaced by an opponent, that opponent would likely be a non-Alawite, which opens up the possibility that the new leadership may not be as willing to allow Russian naval operations emanate from Tartus. This factor in and of itself can partially explain why Russian President Vladimir Putin has supported the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. For this geopolitical reason Russia has strong reasoning for maintaining their involvement and therefore support within Syria, particularly for the Assad regime.<sup>82</sup>

If Russia was to lose their naval port in Syria, they would ultimately forfeit one of their two predominant warm water access points that are crucial for military endeavors. This would significantly curtail their military power, and from a realist standpoint, threaten their overall power and security as an actor on the world stage. To that end, Russian involvement in Syria is openly geopolitical as they seek to maintain power by ensuring the existence of their naval base

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<sup>81</sup>*Regional Cases In U.S. Foreign Policy*, Chapter 5: Europe. By Donald M. Snow.

<sup>82</sup>*Regional Cases In U.S. Foreign Policy*, Chapter 5: Europe. By Donald M. Snow.

and therefore military capabilities in Tartus, which remains secure as long as the Assad regime is in power.

Another geopolitical reason behind Russia's intervention comes from their national interest in maintaining global and regional stability. The geopolitical reasoning which centers around combating threats to Russia's national interest are twofold. Firstly, Russian intervention to support the Assad regime was seen as necessary to combat forces of transnational terrorism.<sup>83</sup> Russia first intervened in this conflict in 2015 by way of airstrikes against terrorist targets.<sup>84</sup> Claims were made that Russia was strictly targeting IS and other terrorist groups. However, American officials take the positions that Russian airstrikes have the larger range of targeting any rebel forces that are opposing the Assad regime. Regardless, the emergence of ISIS in Syria triggered leaders in Russia and stirred up fears that ISIS could inspire domestic terrorism. Above all, leaders in Moscow feared that if Assad were to fall, Sunni extremists would be ready to fill the power void which would further threaten Russia's national interest and the larger global and regional security and stability.

Secondly, Russian intervention to support the Assad regime and deter his downfall would prevent the legitimization of continued Western - backed regime change.<sup>85</sup> Leaders in Russia view Western led efforts to undermine and overthrow regimes that do not fit their expectations as a threat to Russian national security. One aspect of this threat to Russian national security comes from the Russian view that Western led overthrows of undesirable regimes are a key factor in the transformation of the Middle East into a land of anarchy and instability. This threat is augmented

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<sup>83</sup>*RAND Corporation*, "Understanding Russia's Intervention In Syria" By Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, page 4.

<sup>84</sup>"Syria Conflict: What do the US, Russia, Turkey and Iran Want?" By Alexander Pearson and Lewis Sanders

<sup>85</sup>*RAND Corporation*, "Understanding Russia's Intervention In Syria" By Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, page 4.



by the fear of the possibility that the United States may use this same tactic elsewhere, showing no restraint. Therefore, it is believed that in preventing this type of unrestrained behavior that the world saw in Iraq and Libya from occurring in Syria, Russia is able to prevent this tactic from taking root globally.

Another geopolitical motivator for Russia to take action in the Syrian conflict is closely aligned with the basis of this conflict serving as yet another Cold War proxy war between Russia and the United States. Following the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine, Western powers imposed sanctions on Russia. This conflict in Syria emerges as an opportunity to counter the United States and gain leverage or prove that Russia deserves a larger role and position as a great power on the world stage.

While Russia does support plans for peace in Syria, they remain steadfast in their support of President Assad and demand peace plans go forth while he remains in power. Iran has stood as another strong supporter of the Assad government and has worked with Russia. Iran specifically has deployed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and their ally, Hezbollah. These actors have been fighting ISIS and the broader Syrian opposition forces.

Finally, a last reason Russia is interested in Syria is at the root of the post-Cold War World Order, Russia seeks to be accepted as a great power. During the Cold War the Soviet Union was a strong force, this accomplishment was rapidly shattered in 1991 as the Soviet Union fell. Since then, Russia has embarked on a journey to be respected and assume a prominent position on the larger international world stage. For Russia, the future holds a great deal of uncertainty and they are the weaker actor in these repeating competitive foreign policy proxy wars.

Aside from Russia, another main actor in this conflict is Turkey. Turkey's main interest in this conflict is the Kurds because they view them as a domestic threat. Throughout this conflict Turkey has been a strong backer of the Syrian opposition, mainly in the form of the Free Syrian Army. That being said, Turkey's role in the Syrian conflict stems from their self interest in maintaining security and stability within their own borders by keeping the Kurds from achieving autonomy. Due to the fact that the Erdogan administration in Turkey views the YPG as an ally to the PKK and therefore a threat to Turkey, there is a strong incentive for Turkish forces to create a security buffer zone on its border with Syria to keep distance between them and the Syrian Kurds.<sup>86</sup> This position therefore complicates relations between Turkey and the United States as they are both acting in a self-interested manner to achieve their goals.

The United States has led the coalition of other powerful actors in their strong commitment to countering and eliminating the threat of ISIS. This feat has been successful thanks to the support and power the Kurdish forces have contributed towards achieving this shared goal. In this regard, the Kurdish forces are a strategic and useful means by which the United States can fight ISIS and attain their goal. On the flip side, the Kurdish forces also pose as a threat to Turkey and deeply divides the country. Thus far, the Erdogan administration has been committed to blocking territorial gains by the Syrian Kurds as they want to prevent Kurdish autonomy in the post-war landscape. This predicament in and of itself shows the Realist theory at work. While Turkey acts in a self-interested manner to protect its power and security it threatens other actors in Syria. At the same time, while the United States acts in a self-interested manner to combat the threat of ISIS, they do so by utilizing additional forces like the Kurds. This self-

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<sup>86</sup>“Turkey’s War in Syria Was Not Inevitable” By Seth J. Frantzman. *Foreign Policy*.

interested act appears as threatening to Turkey specifically as they view Kurds as a domestic threat.

As the realist theory purports when one actor feels threatened, they will likely balance or counter that threat. Therefore, in focusing on U.S. foreign policy, it would be wise and strategic for the United States to limit their actions when they are directly threatening another actor. In the long term, this will prevent other actors from responding to the threatening, aggressive behavior on behalf of the United States and thus, enable the United States to maintain their position as the dominant unipolar power on the world stage.

Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, The United States has been initially concerned with the destruction of ISIS in Syria and Iraq and overthrowing the Assad regime in Syria. The United States has supported rebel factions who are fighting against the Assad regime's forces. Specifically, they provided the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with monetary aid and weapons. On a larger scale, the United States led the coalition of international actors to combat ISIS since late 2014 and has maintained their commitment to eliminate the extremist group from Syria. A situation then presents itself in which the United States' two goals in this conflict, eliminating ISIS and eliminating the Assad regime, come head to head. Essentially, the United States has a common enemy with both of its own enemies. If anything, I think this bolsters my argument in that the United States is involved in battles that serve little importance to its security and national interest. Rather, stuck in a vicious cycle, the United States engages in conflicts with the purpose of countering Russian power and influence but only threatens other actors in the process. In the end, the United States is acting foolishly and threatening its role as the dominant unipolar power.

More recently, the United States policy has shifted to focus more so on their commitment to destroying ISIS. The Islamic State still remains a grave threat to the national security of the

United States and has created immense instability across Europe.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, Iran's presence and influence in Syria, supporting the Assad regime poses as a significant threat on a regional level due to tensions between Iran and United States' ally, the Israelis. Though it has been an element of past conflicts, violent and forceful regime change through invasion and occupation has not been on the American agenda for Syria. Rather, since the onset of this civil conflict, the United States has called for a transition of power through Syrian peace negotiations under the UN. In 2012 the permanent members of the UN Security Council put forth the Geneva Agreement which the Assad regime rejected.<sup>88</sup> Under the Trump administration there has been a clear signal that the United States does not support President Assad's behavior. The U.S. military airstrikes as a response to the Assad regime's chemical attacks show that this behavior is unacceptable.

### **The Proxy War Problem**

As this is my third case study centering around the proxy war dynamic and subsequent issues, I hope it is obvious that these insignificant battles, posed between the United States and Russia are not within the long-term best interest of the United States. The proxy war problem is prevalent within civil wars because external actors support local factions and provide the support necessary to wage a larger regional or global struggle. The weapons and funds provided to local actors from the powerful external actors establish a state of disorder and instability which further prolongs the conflict.

Specifically, during the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union provided ample support to a host of smaller and weaker countries engaged in civil battle. Not only that, these two powers had the land, means, and domestic support to continually engage in proxy battles against

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<sup>87</sup>“The United States Is Done Caring About Syria” by Steven A. Cook in *Foreign Policy*.

<sup>88</sup>“The United States In Syria: Why It Still Matters” by Frederic C. Hof. *Atlantic Council*.

each other. Under these circumstances it was strategic for the United States to engage in these smaller battles for the goal of spreading American influence while containing Soviet influence. This is no longer the case. As the unipolar power, the United States now enjoys immense power, security, and influence. However, with those insurances, the United States also appears as threatening to weaker powers when power is used excessively or foolishly. Therefore, in order to prolong this dominance and maintain its role as the unipolar power, the United States should exercise restraint so to not appear as a threat to other powers in the international world order.

Through the scope of the Syrian civil war, U.S. diplomacy has more or less failed to effectively balance or counter Russian influence. Though it is within both Russia and U.S. interests to combat ISIS, the camaraderie has ended there. While the threat and influence of ISIS has simmered down, the broader proxy war still advances. The United States has, to some degree, accomplished one of its two goals in this conflict. That is, by providing strong military strength and manpower, ISIS has been countered and largely dissolved in Syria. The second goal, removing the Assad regime, has not been accomplished and the United States has not been able to work with Russia to implement a ceasefire or attain a plan for peace going forwards. To that end, it has come to a point in which it is glaringly obvious that this battle is not within the long-term best interest of the United States.<sup>89</sup>

The prolonged conflict and resulting tragedies that are occurring in Syria further perpetuates the image of American weakness in the Middle East. On the heels of failed American intervention and foreign policy initiatives in Libya and Iraq, the United States is only further damaging their unipolar dominance by forging sentiments of resentment.

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<sup>89</sup>“The Case For and Against a “Realist” Strategy in Syria” by Anthony H. Cordesman and Aram Nerguizian at the Center For Strategic & International Studies.

In thinking about options of intervention or deterrence in Syria, inflicted by Russia or the U.S., these options can either further protect one's national interest or threaten one's standing and dominance on the world stage. If the United States successfully overthrew the Assad regime and continued to support his opponents, this action would yield widespread chaos, instability, and bloodshed. Russia on the other hand sees a direct value in their continued support of the Assad regime as it will allow them to prolong their influence in the region and maintain their naval port in Tartus. Due to the fact that the Assad regime benefits from continued support not only from Russia, but also Iran, effective U.S. intervention becomes more complex as both of Assad's strong backers would be vigorously opposed. In this regard, even if the United States were to work with Russia to engage in a policy that would benefit both actors in terms of power and security, this would leave a power vacuum around influencing the Assad administration that Iranian leaders would be eager to fill.<sup>90</sup>

With these considerations in mind and following the realist framework, the United States should realize the implications associated with further intervention in this region. The most concerning of which would be the Russian reaction to unrestrained U.S. power. As I mentioned previously, the Assad regime has the support of Russia and Iran who both stand in opposition to unrestrained U.S. power. Therefore, the United States should act with restraint to avoid the risk of threatening these strong powers. Going forwards, the United States must act with caution and consider the implications of unrestrained U.S. power when analyzing the civil conflict and proxy war scenario in Syria.

The civil war in Syria is unique in that it is so geopolitical and multifaceted, leading a number of various actors and factions to emerge all with wavering allies, enemies, common

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<sup>90</sup>“A Realist Approach To Syria” By Adam Lammon in *The National Interest*.

goals, and opposing ideas. Regardless of the strategic importance U.S. leaders prop up to justify intervention to domestic audiences, it is not strategic by any means to intervene in this conflict and solve the differences we cannot begin to understand. In looking at this conflict and the overarching proxy war through a realist lens, we can see that each actor in the international order at the very least seeks to preserve their security, at best they strive to accumulate more power. Therefore, in an effort to maintain the power and security enjoyed by the United States as the dominant unipolar power in the international world order, the best course of action is one that would remove the United States from this conflict and instead, rebuild confidence and trust amongst other actors on the world stage. Even more importantly, the United States should take all action to not appear as threatening to other actors as that is what will evoke a reaction from other powerful actors and undermine U.S. power and dominance.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Keeping in line with the Realist theory, each actor seeks to maximize and maintain their security, influence, and power. Having achieved the role of the unipolar power in the international world order, leaders in the United States should act strategically to protect and preserve this position. The United States, just like every other actor involved in the Syrian civil conflict and the larger proxy war, will act in a self-interested manner to attain their goals. The United States' main goal in this conflict is to eliminate the threat of ISIS, a goal shared by a number of other actors as well. Though it may be nearly impossible to eliminate a threat like ISIS due to the nature of their rhetoric, caliphate, and the fact it is the ideology not a physical thing that attracts recruits, the U.S. can gain small successes in achieving stability in bordering countries so the Islamist extremist threat does not spread. While much of ISIS's influence has dwindled and they continue to lose territory in Syria, you cannot eradicate an ideology. The

Islamist extremist threat will be present into the future, but it will be less successful in places that boast stability. Acting in a realist manner in Syria would mean advocating for United States disengagement. This would be a strategic move on behalf of the United States in which other actors would now be able to achieve their goals independently of U.S. support or hindrance.

Another case for disengagement in Syria stems from the lack of strategic importance Syria provides to the United States in the grand scheme of things. A realist approach should be taken in regard to U.S. action in Syria because Syria provides very little strategic importance. Considering the strategic priorities that the United States has in this proxy war, disengagement would force the Iranian, Russian, and Turkish governments to take more responsibility for their role in this conflict and their subsequent actions. In acting with restraint, the United States would be able to strengthen alliances and work towards other attainable goals rather than threatening other actors in this region. I would like to point out that according to realist logic, the United States should refrain from antagonizing powerful actors as to maintain its leading, dominant role. I assert that the United States additionally should refrain from threatening weaker actors as they have the potential to align with one another and with stronger power to balance the United States collectively which would not be within the best interest of the United States. Overall, this restraint will strengthen the position of the United States as the dominant power and its role as the unipolar power will not be at stake.

From both Russian and American foreign policy perspectives, the main attractor of foreign powers in this conflict is the widespread instability that has ensued. Both of these main actors want to see this region and this country as a stable one. However, the proxy war that has culminated is largely due to the battle over which of the two larger powers will be able to achieve this highly coveted stability and assert their influence in this sensitive period. It is within



both global power's interest to lay the groundwork for prolonged, lasting stability, both in Syria and the broader region. For the United States to effectively act in line with the Realist theory in an effort to maintain their position as the unipolar power, steps should be taken to disassociate from the direct efforts in shaping a ceasefire or plan for peace in Syria. The role of the U.S military in Syria should also be lessened as to not threaten other actors present in the conflict.

While the Realist theory maintains that actors will act in a self-interested manner to protect their power and security, the structure of the international system itself can force actors to go to war with each other. While analyzing the civil conflict in Syria as a Cold War proxy war, it is evident that while this is true, it is also the cause of great powers to deteriorate. While in this scenario we can interpret the globalized Syrian conflict as great powers supporting varying interests of the Syrian people and Syrian leadership and therefore battling each other to support their domestic alignment, in the long term this battle will severely harm the regional and global stability and the perceived roles of the great powers involved.

## VI. Conclusion

In line with Stephen Walt's realist perspective, I assert that the United States ought to make foreign policy decisions that serve to protect and prolong its role as the dominant unipolar power. Within the unipolar world order, a sole leading power should use caution when extending its power and dominance because their actions can threaten weaker powers. In the long term, this is dangerous because weaker powers may take countermeasures that can ultimately undermine the power and dominance of the leading unipolar power. To this end, the United States can better serve its interests by acting in a restrained and careful manner as to not threaten other actors on the world stage.

In this thesis, I have introduced the realist theory of international relations and highlighted varying strains within that field of thought. One strain I have discussed is structural realism which is associated with scholars like Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt. As I have outlined, structural realism has little regard for human nature, instead, it focuses on the effects, structure, and distribution of power within the international system. Under this perspective, the international system consists of numerous great powers, or states, each of whom seeks to survive. Because one sole world government ceases to exist within the broader international system, there is anarchy and each state is engaged in a battle for survival. This condition leads the weaker states to balance against powerful rivals rather than bandwagon with them.

Throughout my research, review of the literature, and subsequent analysis I have come to align with Stephen Walt's version of realism. Walt's assessment postulates that states exist within a structure of the international system and state leaders make decisions that cause them to be more or less threatening to other actors. Additionally, factors like geography and the relative strength of states are influential factors that affect the balance of power and how states behave in

the face of that balance. In utilizing Stephen Walt's approach and understanding of the international world order that has existed since the close of the Cold War, I examined the current conflict in Syria, the political climate in Ukraine, and the fate of NATO to show that the United States is currently its own worst enemy due to its lack of constraint and foolish behavior.

In the post-Cold War era, the United States assumed the position as the sole dominant power on the world stage. With that role came an enormous amount of control and influence. While the U.S. could have forged a path of peace forward, I argue that it has been engaged in a constant state of proxy wars. I argue and illustrate through my three case studies that the United States has made repeated foreign policy decisions that threaten and undermine its role as the dominant unipolar power. In engaging in these various proxy wars, the United States has acted without restraint and has exerted power and influence where it is not always wanted or necessary. This aggressive behavior, in turn, threatens other weaker, but still influential powers on the world stage, causing them to view the United States in a negative light. In the long term, I believe it will be this aggressive and unrestrained behavior on behalf of the United States that will threaten and even alter the unipolar world we enjoy today.

I chose to focus my analysis through the scope of Russia - U.S. relations in the post and post-post Cold War because I see many of the United States' foreign policy initiatives stemming from the desire to counter Russian expansion and influence. If the tumultuous history and fluctuating relations between the United States and Russia have proven anything, it is that there will always be a level of conflict in some form between these two actors, allowing both countries the opportunity to escalate or diminish the tension. However, in line with the Realist theory, if the United States seeks to maintain its role as the dominant unipolar power it needs to act in a

less threatening manner as to not disrupt the current balance of power on the world stage, allowing it to remain the dominant superpower.

In my first case study, I analyzed NATO as a current proxy war between the two previous bipolar world powers, the United States and Russia. In this case study, I introduced the Cold War essentially as a battle between the East and West and their respective influences and influencers. This cold battle can be considered as a lengthy period riddled with geopolitical tension, competition, conflict, and varying proxy wars. Through the scope of NATO as a Cold War proxy war, the tension lies within the fact that the United States, serving as the dominant power in the Unipolar world order, has advocated for NATO expansion, especially Eastward. However, Russia has responded in opposition to this expansion as it serves as a direct threat to their overall security and national interest.

At the onset of this chapter, I outlined NATO's existence as a Western-influenced multilateral organization originating during the Cold War. In that capacity, NATO sought to exist in line with the containment doctrine which would prevent any further Soviet advancements into Europe. While the Soviet Union officially fell at the close of the Cold War, NATO still exists today. I argue that NATO's interactions and expansions have transformed this organization's role from a protector against the Soviet Union to a provoker of Russian anger. Additionally, through this case study, I argue that the United States has been acting in an aggressive and unrestrained manner as it enters into Cold War proxy wars. Through NATO's existence, the United States' unrestrained behavior materializes from its desire to expand the alliance Eastward, in direct disregard of Russia's security and national interest. To that end, the United States is undermining and threatening its role and influence as the unipolar power.

In my second case study, I analyzed the country of Ukraine and the current political climate as another Cold War proxy war between the United States and Russia. In this proxy war, Ukraine stands as a strategic actor in the United States' unipolar world order and as a point of contention between the United States and Russia. In the post-post Cold War era, Russia has sought to claim a position on the world stage and exert dominance in their region to protect their interests and security. This has resulted in the current Western sentiment that Russia's involvement and behavior towards Ukraine in the post-Cold War landscape is aggressive and threatening to the United States' unipolar world order. Therefore, the United States is acting in a foolish manner by intervening in the domestic politics of Ukraine and pushing European integration for the sole purpose of countering Russian influence.

What this case study yields, is that if the United States were to come to the realization that Russia has more at stake and a deeper-rooted fundamental interest in Ukraine, then it would be within the best interest of the U.S. to remove itself from this smaller-scale battle in which its continued actions and use of force appear to be foolish and harmful to its long term unipolar dominance.

In my final case study, I analyzed the Syrian civil war and ongoing conflict as another Cold War proxy war between Russia and the United States. In this proxy war, I viewed Russia and the United States in a continued struggle to achieve a post-Cold War existence compatible with each other's view of their roles in the new international world order. The situation in Syria serves as a battleground in which the United States and Russia have acted through internal actors to protect each of their own interests, security, and power. I put forth the argument that the United States' involvement in this conflict is not only foolish but directly threatens their dominance and unipolar standing on the world stage.

Syria as a Cold War proxy war is particularly interesting because it stands as an arena in which both the U.S. and Russia have the means and opportunity to exert power and influence on a third-party actor. Either actors' success in exerting this power and influence will allow them to serve as a check on the other and accumulate more power. With that being said, Syria presents a situation in which the United States has no apparent interests other than combating the threat of ISIS and overthrowing the regime in power. Therefore, for the purposes of my argument, the conflict in Syria presents another instance in which the United States is acting in a foolish and unrestrained manner threatening its overall position and influence as the dominant, unipolar power.

From my analysis, I found a recurring sentiment and deeply rooted tendency for the United States and Russia to view each other in the worst light. To that end, in numerous instances and through Cold War proxy wars like the ones I have described, each actor reacts to the other with harsher policy initiatives and with increased mistrust. I would argue that this has created an endless cycle of conflict in which the United States and Russia repeatedly compete to assert their power and dominance over a less significant third-party actor for the sake of countering the other power. I affirm that it is this vicious cycle that compels the United States to act in a foolish manner as American foreign policymakers are faced with the question of how to respond to Russia's actions while also maintaining American power and security.

My overarching argument throughout this thesis has recommended that the United States engage in foreign policy that does not exhibit unrestrained power which further threatens other actors on the world stage. Corresponding to my three case studies, I would like to briefly provide my own recommendations for U.S. foreign policy initiatives going forwards. In terms of American action in the Middle East, previous U.S. policymakers have justifiably viewed ISIS as

presenting a sufficient threat to U.S. interests, however, this is then used to justify a sustained military response. Though destroying ISIS stands as one of the two primary goals of the United States' intervention in Syria, ISIS is only a symptom of the breakdown in the regional order. Therefore the U.S. should undertake a policy in which they are removed from the regional order and can rather remotely assist the dissolution of ISIS by supporting regional actors.

Additionally, through my research and analysis of NATO and the resulting tensions in Ukraine, NATO expansion should be greatly curtailed. This, of course, is unless the alliance underwent a total transformation and readjustment of goals and purpose. This alteration could shift the alliances' existence from a military check on Soviet influence on a multilateral organization consisting of states with similar interests. This revamped idea of NATO stands as being somewhat broad I am aware. But this could also be an indicator that NATO's days are in the past and it has accomplished its task. Further Western-led efforts to continue NATO's existence and expansion are evidently serving more as a hindrance to world peace, as we can see in Ukraine, than as a protector of Western values and ideas.

It is to that end that the United States could currently benefit from a more restrained and reclusive foreign policy. Though the intentions of the U.S. may be sincere and valid as they seek to keep a check on growing Russian power and influence, the outcome is largely negative and detrimental to the long-term goal of prolonging American dominance and their role as the unipolar power.

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